

YOUNG KLONDIKE

STORIES OF A GOLD SEEKER.

Issued Semi-Monthly—By Subscription \$1.25 per year. Entered as Second Class Matter at the New York, N. Y., Post Office, March 15, 1898, by Frank Tousey.

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NEW YORK, June 22, 1898.

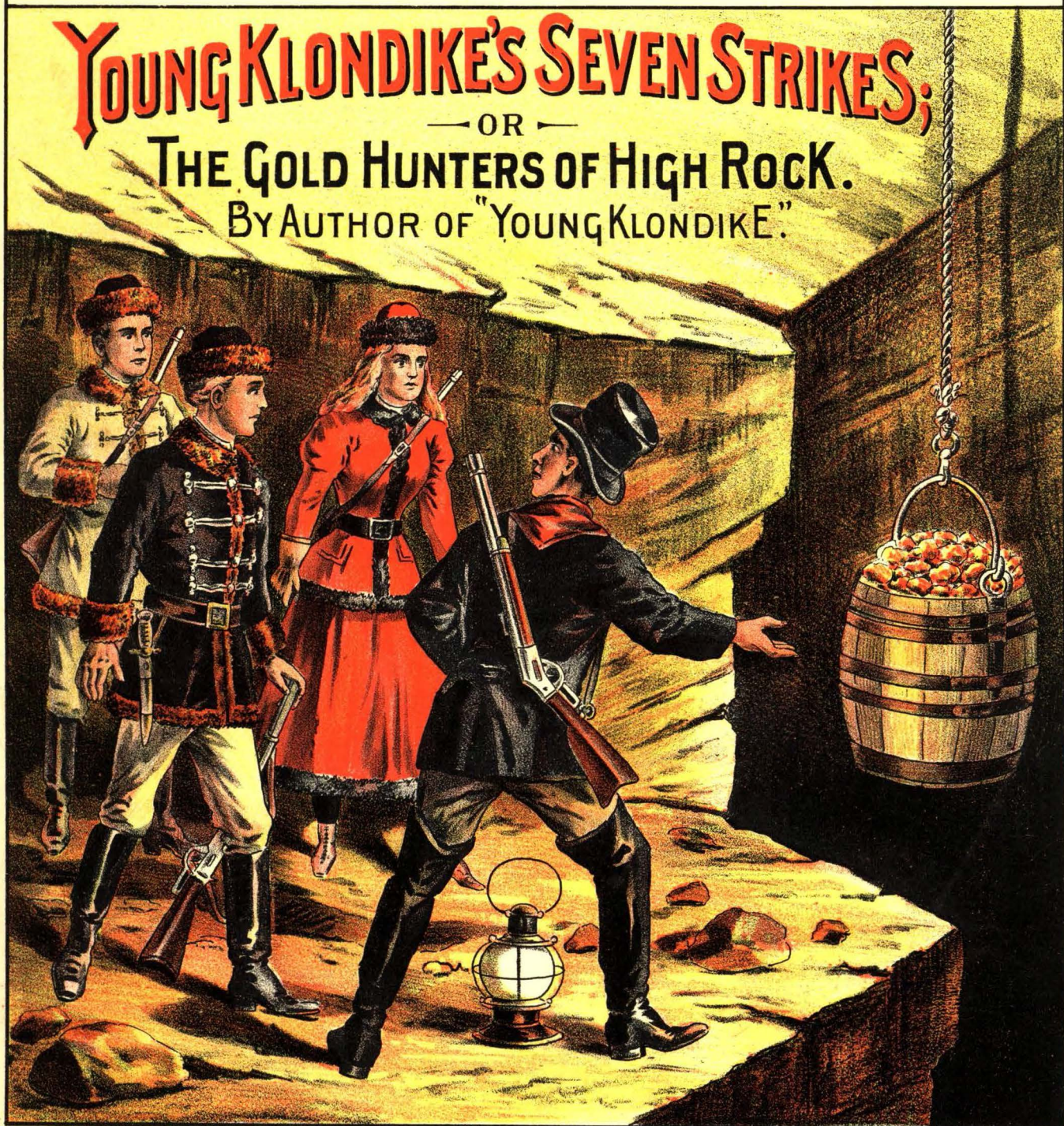
Price 5 Cents.

YOUNG KLONDIKE'S SEVEN STRIKES;

—OR—

THE GOLD HUNTERS OF HIGH ROCK.

BY AUTHOR OF "YOUNG KLONDIKE."



They had to wait about ten minutes. Then the rope was shaken and immediately it began to run through the pulley above—if there was a pulley, as the detective assumed—and after that the bucket flew past them loaded to the brim with golden nuggets.

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Young Klondike's Seven Strikes; OR, THE GOLD HUNTERS OF HIGH ROCK.

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CHAPTER I.

LOST IN THE STORM.

The ring of the rifle rattled back from the towering rocks, the echo reverberating down the ravine until lost in the distance.

"Missed again!" cried Young Klondike, grounding arms with his Winchester.

"There's no use talking, Zed, I shall never make a shot like Edith, if I keep on practising for a hundred years."

"Young Klondike," our hero, stood on a ledge of rock far up the mountain side, looking down the ravine toward Black Lake, one of the largest sheets of water in the great Yukon Valley, where lakes and ponds are as plentiful as wild cherries on a full bearing tree.

His companion was a short, stocky man, wearing long cavalry boots and a very tall plug hat, entirely out of style and very uncomfortable, considering that the Arctic winter was just setting in and Black Lake frozen over solid enough to hold up an ox team.

This oddly-dressed man was known to Ned Golden—otherwise "Young Klondike"—as the "Unknown," something as odd as his dress, but accounted for by the fact that neither Ned nor any one else in the Klondike country knew his real name.

"Don't you fret about your shooting!" he answered. "You are improving daily. To hit a fox across the ravine would require a good hand at the rifle even if Mr. Fox was standing still, but when he happens to be on the dead run, as this one was, what can you expect?"

"Perhaps Edith would have hit it, though," was the reply.

"Edith is an exceptionally good shot. There ain't one in a thousand who can equal her."

"I know I can't, and I never expect to, but come, Zed, we'd better get down the mountain and make for camp. It looks to me as if it was going to snow."

"Do you think so?"

"Yes. Don't you?"

"Now that you come to speak of it, I'll be blest if I don't. Say, a snow storm at this time means something. Hang me, if I like to contemplate another Klondike winter. Had enough of it last year. I think I froze my ears a hundred times, and I'm not sure that it wasn't a hundred and ten."

"Then why in thunder will you persist in wearing that ridiculous plug hat? Why don't you dress same as the rest of us do?"

"Why? By the Jumping Jeremiah, I don't know. Why am I a detective? Why am I in the Klondike at all, following the fortunes of Golden & Luckey and our dear Edith, the best girl in Alaska, or British America, or any other old place? Why am I always looking for my man and never finding him? Why am I what I am, and not somebody else? You tell me and I'll tell you."

Young Klondike laughed as he hurried down the mountain side with his odd companion.

It was the comical way in which the Unknown put it rather than what he said which called forth the laugh, for all this was an old story with Ned Golden.

Since the day of his first meeting with the detective he had been going on this way; it was his peculiarity, his whim, just as it was to suddenly pounce upon a stranger and declare that he was the mysterious criminal for whom he professed to be looking—"his man," as he called him, but the right man was never found.

Such was the "Unknown," and as for Young Klondike himself, we may mention here that Ned Golden and Dick Luckey, his partner and chum, were two New York clerks who went to the Klondike to make a fortune, and that they had done it.

The firm of Golden & Luckey were rated at more than a million and were now out upon their latest purchase,

the famous "Jennings Patent," lying at some distance back of Forty Mile, prospecting and getting ready to open up mining in the spring on a large scale, as they had already done in a small one at the Golden Island diggings, where at the present time they had upward of a hundred men hard at work, melting the frozen soil and panning out golden nuggets and dust.

"We must try to get back to the island before the storm strikes in on us," remarked Young Klondike. "It just won't do to be caught over here on this side of the lake in a regular old-time blizzard."

"That's what's the matter," replied the detective. "I don't want any of it on my plate, although there is no telling, I might run across my man in this snow storm—who knows?"

"Bother your man!" replied Ned. "You've been looking for him ever since I knew you. If you ever find him it won't be in the Klondike. What we are after now is gold, and lots of it, but first of all we want to strike Edith and Dick."

Usually in their prospecting trips Young Klondike's little party never separated, and, in fact, they had not done so on this occasion until they reached the foot of the mountain.

Here it seemed desirable to get a view of the country on the other side of the big rise, but Edith felt too tired to attempt to climb and Dick Luckey remained behind to keep her company, while Young Klondike and the Unknown went ahead to finish their work.

It was only a thousand feet or so down to the place where Edith and Dick had halted, if one could go as the crow flies, but three miles would scarcely cover the distance as Ned and the Unknown were obliged to go.

They were still at it, climbing down as best they could without the loss of an instant, when all at once the clouds began to gather thick around them and it grew dark, although there still remained at least an hour of the short Arctic day.

"She's a-coming!" cried the detective. "Give it ten minutes more and the storm will be upon us, and we ain't half way down yet."

He was right. Ned knew the signs only too well.

"We better get our bearings before it strikes us," he said.

He produced his glass and carefully surveyed the slope which stretched away from their feet.

It was just one mass of broken rock overhanging the frozen lake.

Huge fragments of stone lay scattered in every direction on the mountain side.

It was just as though the hand of some mighty giant had thrown them there, and to determine one's way over such a trackless waste was difficult enough in the daylight, but when it came to doing it in darkness, the difficulty was great indeed.

While Ned was still looking, the storm came sweeping across the lake and struck the mountain.

To appreciate the full force of this simple statement

one would have to have lived in this wonderful Klondike country.

All in an instant our two mountain climbers were enveloped in a whirl of flakes and everything was blotted out.

"Come, this is decidedly interesting!" exclaimed the detective. "What in thunder are we going to do now?"

"Go on," replied Ned; "and the faster we go the better."

"Yes, if we don't break our necks in doing it. Hadn't we better fire a shot to let Dick and Edith know where we are?"

Ned flung up his rifle and let drive. There was an answering shot, but there did come another answer of quite a different kind.

Before the echo had died away a wild chorus of yelps rang out through the storm.

It was a barking, snapping, snarling sound, terrible to listen to, and above it all rose a pitiful cry.

"That's a caribou chased by wolves!" cried Ned.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"How can you tell?"

"I know the caribou's cry."

"Mebbe you are right; there's no denying that those are wolves barking. They seem to be a long way off, though."

"Not so far. From the sound I should judge they were coming our way. We may run into them yet before we get down the mountain."

"Much more likely we shall run into a rock and break our blame necks," growled the detective. "By the Jumping Jeremiah, I'm expecting that happy event every instant. Well, let it come; there'd be one pair of fools less in the world, and that's what we were for coming here at all."

They were still hurrying on, making the best time they could through the blinding whirl of snowflakes.

The barking of the wolves continued and when at length they came out upon a comparatively level stretch it seemed very near.

"They are right on to us!" cried Ned. "Wait a minute; serious as the situation is, I want to try a shot at a caribou if I can get it; fresh meat is scarce, and a good fat caribou would keep us a week."

"Right you are, and stop it is," replied the Unknown, cheerfully enough, and yet it was anything but pleasant stopping there in a storm and listening to the snappy larks of the wolves, now unpleasantly near.

"There they come!" breathed Young Klondike suddenly. "I can hear their footsteps now."

Ned raised his rifle to his shoulder and waited.

Their backs were against the rocks and the full stretch of the level lay before them.

Quick, pattering footsteps could be heard and then, all at once, out of the gloom a big caribou came into view, closely followed by a pack of wolves.

It was running so rapidly that Ned could not fix his sight for a shot, and while he hesitated a shot rang out and down dropped a caribou—dead.

"Ye gods and little fishes! That's Edith and no one else!" cried the Unknown.

Again the hidden rifle spoke and again and again, and down tumbled three wolves, one after another.

Ned, without a word, fired several shots, two bringing down a wolf and the remainder of the pack went sneaking away into the storm, their dismal howls waking the echoes in the distance.

"Edith! Edith! Dick! Are you there?" shouted the Unknown, while the shooting was going on.

"Right here!" answered a cheerful voice, seeming to come from above them. That you, Ned?"

"Yes, yes!" yelled the detective, not giving Ned a chance to answer. "Is Dick there, too?"

"So he is!" called another voice. "We came out to look for you, but I'll be blest if we haven't lost ourselves in the storm."

CHAPTER II.

THE STRANGE SHADOWS ON THE ROCK.

"Lost in the storm, are you?" shouted the detective in answer to the cry which came down from above them. "Well, by the Jumping Jeremiah, I'm not so sure that we ain't lost ourselves."

"Are you coming down, Dick?" called Ned.

"That's what, if we can get down," was the answer, and then a scrambling was heard among the rocks at no great distance away.

Young Klondike and the Unknown hurried in the direction of the sounds, coming suddenly upon a handsome young fellow and a golden-haired girl, a decided beauty and one whose face would have been picked out among a crowd.

"Thank goodness, we found you!" she exclaimed. "I began to be positively frightened when it came on to snow."

"For fear we'd lose ourselves in the mountains?" laughed Young Klondike. "No such good luck, Edith. Zed and I are like a couple of bad pennies—we always turn up."

"Which is the same as saying that we can't lose you for a cent," put in Dick. "What's this Zed was just saying about being lost, though? I tell you what it is, we are lost, and don't you forget it. Of course, all we've got to do is to keep on going down and we're bound to strike the lake somewhere; but we've dodged about these loose rocks so that I wouldn't guarantee to come within a mile of where we started out."

Then there was more talk and a general comparison of notes all around.

"What are we going to do with the caribou?" asked Ned. "It's high time we started; night is upon us, and it's going to be no joke camping out in this storm."

"And that's something I'm afraid we've got to do, anyhow," replied Edith; "so we may as well make the best of it; but we can't take the caribou; we shall have all we can do to take ourselves."

"Perhaps this storm will blow over and we can come back and get him later," said Dick.

"Yes, if the wolves will let us," replied Ned.

"String him up to that tree so the wolves can't get at him," said the detective. "You needn't worry about wasting time. We're booked for a night on the mountain, anyway you have a mind to fix it; the caribou may come in handy before we are through."

There was a cedar of unusual size growing near, and Ned climbed up to the fork of the tree, ready to catch the rope which the detective threw up to him.

The other end of the rope was made fast round the horns of the caribou, and Ned, throwing his end over a limb, pulled the carcass up so that its hind legs were almost on a line with the fork.

In that position it would have taken a pretty spry wolf to get at it.

This done, all started on through the storm.

But they made one great and fatal blunder before they were ten minutes older.

As it is entirely necessary to a correct understanding of our story that we should explain just how this was done, we may as well stop and do it now, and at the same time to mention by way of explanation that Edith Welton was a San Francisco girl whom Ned Golden had rescued from a wrecked steamer on the voyage from Seattle. At that time Edith was on the way to Dawson City to meet her father, who was supposed to be living there; and when upon her arrival at the metropolis of the Yukon Edith found that he had gone off to the South African gold diggings, she decided to cast her fortunes with Ned and Dick, and through many stirring adventures these four firm friends—for we must include the detective—had remained together as we find them now.

So much for Edith—a very important personage, by the way—and now for the mountain down which our friends go scrambling through the darkness and storm.

There was something peculiar about this mountain. It was in reality an extinct volcano and blessed with a crater, as most volcanoes are.

Now, volcanic craters are invariably open above, but this one happened to be open at the side as well. In some past age an earthquake had ripped the rocks, and there was a narrow ravine at the breach leading down to the bottom of the crater, a level plain more than a mile across, for the true bottom had been choked up with lava and an accumulation of earth long ages before.

A few words will explain what all this means to our story.

Young Klondike and his party, in their descent of the mountain, blundered into this ravine.

On they went through the storm, down, down, down, expecting at any moment to come out upon the lake, and when at last they did strike the level, supposed they had done that very thing.

"Here we are at last!" cried Ned as a temporary lull in the storm showed them the vast open space before them. "Now, then, if we can only strike across until we see the lights on the island we may be able to spend the night in our own shanty, after all."

"I suppose," replied Edith, "that we ought to try it, but the snow lies pretty thick here, Ned."

"That's what it does," added Dick; "but there's only one alternative, to get in under the shelter of the rocks and make the best of it till morning. I don't think any of us are hankering to do that."

Certainly this would be a very gloomy prospect for a "tenderfoot," as a newcomer into the Klondike country is called.

To one not used to handling himself under such circumstances it would surely mean death or pneumonia, but Young Klondike's party had no such fears and could have come out of such an adventure without being a bit the worse for it.

Strapped on their backs, each carried a pair of heavy mission blankets and inside the bundles were provisions enough for two days at least.

They had been there "many a time," so to speak. In other words, having braved the terrors of one Arctic winter and being dressed to suit the occasion, they were quite prepared for another; still they had no desire to camp under the rocks if it could be avoided; yet even that was preferable to being caught out on the lake in a blizzard.

That meant death. Young Klondike and all with him firmly believed they were on the edge of the lake now, when, as a matter of fact, they were not within a mile of it.

Nothing more dangerous can be imagined than to make a mistake like this up in the Klondike country. It is ten chances to one the blunder will cause the blunderer his death.

"I don't see any sign of a light," remarked Ned, peering off into the gloom. "Let me see; Golden Island ought to be about there."

"A little further to the right, I should say," answered Dick.

"It seems to me I see a light," said Edith.

"There ain't a sign of it," answered Ned.

"Are you sure?"

"Dead sure."

"I wish I was sure you are right. I see one. How is it with you, Zed?"

"Blest if I can speak positively," replied the Unknown, "and I don't want to mislead you; but it seems to me that I do see a light."

"I shall have to try my night glass," said Ned. "Good thing we've got one. Here goes for a squint now; if there's such a thing as a light to be seen I can make it out."

It needed only one look through the night glass for Ned to be able to announce positively that there was a light.

"I knew I was right," said Edith.

"Hello! What do you say now?" cried the Unknown.

"There, now, there's no disputing it," said Dick. Suddenly the light flashed up so distinctly that all could see it.

"That's our big reflector," declared Ned. "Nat Ring is getting worried about us. He means to give us a chance to get back to camp."

Nat Ring was the foreman at the Golden Island diggings, and there was really nothing strange in Young Klondike being thus deceived.

Yet the truth of the matter was, they were not looking in the direction of the camp at all, and if they had been they could not have seen a lighthouse nor even an electric flash light, for there was the mountain lying directly in the way.

"We start, of course," said Ned.

"Certainly we do," replied Dick and the detective in one breath.

So they started off over the floor of the crater, firm in the belief that they were walking over the frozen lake.

As they continued to advance the light grew brighter and brighter and the storm seemed, in a word, to stop.

Then all in a moment the conditions changed again. A fierce gust swept through the crater, bringing with it a whirl of snow so thick that everything was blotted out except the light, which shone through the white, falling mass like a huge star.

"By the Jumping Jeremiah, this is fine!" growled the detective. "If I should meet my man here I wouldn't know him; lucky thing, though, we have the light."

"Who says we've got the light?" cried Dick; and, sure enough, they hadn't. There was one sudden, gleaming flash, and the light disappeared, leaving nothing behind to break the gloom.

"Confound Ring! What does he want to turn it off for now, just as we are in the middle of the lake?" cried Ned.

"He'll hear from me for doing it if we ever get back," said Dick. "He must know it's out, even if he has gone into the shanty; but perhaps he'll light it again in a moment."

The moments passed, however, and the light did not reappear.

Meanwhile our travelers kept on ploughing their way through the snow.

It was getting serious. For any one to hope to follow a straight course under such circumstances was to hope for the impossible, and Ned knew that well enough.

There was another thing he noticed. In all this conversation about the vanished light the detective had said nothing.

When the Unknown put his "thinking cap" on, Ned always let him alone, for something usually came of it; but on this occasion they pushed on for fully ten minutes and the detective never spoke a word.

"Come, Zed, what are you thinking about?" Young Klondike suddenly demanded.

"I don't know whether I better tell my thoughts or not, dear boy," replied the Unknown. "I'm not sure that you'd like to hear them."

"I knew you were chewing on something. Out with it."

"Well, then, I've come to the conclusion that we are all mistaken and that ain't the light on Golden Island at all."

"I quite agree with you," said Edith, as coolly as if she

were speaking of the most trivial matter instead of one which might involve life or death.

"Nonsense!" cried Ned. "What else can it be?"

"Can have been—remember, there's no light there now," was the detective's reply.

"Can have been, then; any way at all you've a mind to put it."

"That's more than I can tell you; but I'm satisfied it wasn't our light."

"Will you please to account for its appearance on the island, then? Since we drove the claim jumpers off the Jennings patent we know that there's nobody else left here."

"No, we don't. There may be others; but what I say is, that light never burned on the island. I claim there isn't any island out that way at all."

"Ridiculous!" said Dick. "Next thing you'll be telling us that we are not walking over the lake."

"Precisely what I'm about to tell you—exactly what I believe."

"It don't seem possible that you can be right," said Ned, seriously.

"I am."

"He is," added Edith.

"By gracious, he must be!" cried Dick, who was walking a little ahead.

Dick suddenly stopped, and it was well that he did, or he would have run into a big boulder which lay directly in their path.

"What do you say now?" exclaimed the detective. "Is there any such rock as that standing up out of the lake?"

Ned knew well enough that there was not, and all knew it, for in their little naphtha launch they had explored the lake from one end to the other.

"We're off our course, and that's all there is about it," said the detective; "but we may as well keep right on."

There was no one to dispute this. If they were not to perish in the storm it was necessary to find shelter somewhere.

Fortunately it was not very cold, but the snow brought a chilliness of its own which was most trying and it had now grown so deep that it was becoming very difficult to make their way through.

For perhaps a quarter of an hour longer they kept on without speaking, when all at once they were brought up with a round turn by the sudden flashing of the light again.

This time it came from behind, but what was more startling even than the sudden appearance of the light itself was the fact that it shone directly on a vast wall of rock rising perpendicularly before them and extending upward and off on each side as far as the eye could penetrate the gloom.

Of course everybody stopped short and turned to look back at the light.

There it was, shining through the snowflakes like the headlight of a locomotive, clear and steady.

There on the other side was the wall of rock, cutting off further progress in that direction, and then and there,

as they stood pondering on the mystery, a very remarkable thing occurred.

"Look! Look!" cried Edith, suddenly; but it was not necessary for her to call attention to what they all saw.

There on the face of the rock two gigantic shadows were suddenly flashed—shadows of men with rifles at their shoulders.

Then all in an instant they could see a puff of smoke at the muzzle of each rifle and two sharp reports rang out through the gloom.

CHAPTER III.

THAT AWFUL NIGHT IN THE CAVE.

"Ned, they are firing at us!" cried Edith as the shots rang out again and those two giant shadows on the high rock were seen to repeat their manoeuvre and let fly.

"Run! Run for your life, Edith!" exclaimed the detective. "Run to the rock!"

The Unknown turned and fired back into the darkness.

Ned and Dick did the same, but Edith, utterly declining to save herself at the expense of her friends, blazed away, too.

Answering shots continued to come, and they could hear the zip of the bullets all about them until Edith fired.

Of course it was only a shot in the dark, but its effect was marvelous just the same.

There was a sharp cry and the light suddenly went out.

With the vanishing of the light the shots ceased to come and all grew as still as death.

Then they ran for the high rock as fast as they could make their way through the snow.

"If we can back up against it we'll only have to watch out one way, anyhow," declared the detective, "for, don't you forget it, whoever our unseen enemies are, they are going to come for us again."

When they got alongside the rock they found to their great relief that the ground in front of it was bare of snow.

The wind was blowing from the rock, which caused the snow to drift away from it. There was standing room on dry ground, anyhow, and there was something to be thankful for in that.

"It is dry ground, ain't it?" inquired Dick. "No ice here, Ned."

"That's what's the matter. It was all a mistake. We never struck the lake at all."

But right here the mystery of it came in.

They had gone down the mountain until they came to the bottom—as they supposed.

Here the lake ought to have been and wasn't. Ned could not understand it, and the detective, who had divined something of the truth, was utterly unable to explain how this could be.

"It's just no use at all to ask me about it," he declared, as they stood there under the high rock discussing the situation. "I sort of felt that we were not traveling over the lake, although I knew that by rights we ought to be. If we ain't there, then where the deuce are we—that's what I want to know."

"They seem inclined to leave us alone, anyhow," said Ned, "and that's one good thing."

"Hadn't we better make a move while there's a chance? There's no telling what may happen next."

"Motion seconded," said the Unknown. "Edith, you are a wonderful shot—truly wonderful! Whether you fire in the dark or the light it seems to be all the same. You silenced the enemy's batteries completely, while all they did was to flatten a lot of bullets against the rock."

"It was all luck," said Edith.

"Then it's good to have a lucky one with us at a time like the present; but what's this? A break in this everlasting wall, as sure as my name ain't Peter Stubbs."

"Always at it," laughed Ned. "Why don't you tell your name and be done with it? But I suppose there's no use asking you, so we may as well explore this hole in the wall and see what it amounts to."

"It amounts to shelter for the night, anyhow," said Edith. "See, it runs way in under the rock."

"If we only had a lantern now," said Dick, who didn't like the idea of pushing on into the blackness, and, strange as it may seem, the wish had no more than been expressed than it was granted, for all in the same instant the light flashed upon them again.

"Look out for shots!" cried the Unknown, throwing his arm around Edith and dragging her into the cave.

Ned and Dick made a dive in after them, and none too and five shots fired in quick succession rang out.

Three went rattling against the rock, the other two came into the cave, and they could hear the zip of the bullets as they flew past.

"We must get out of the way of those things!" cried Ned. "Heavens! I hope we haven't made a mistake in coming here."

They ran on further into the cave.

The opening remained narrow—they could feel the walls on either side of them; the ground was smooth sand and as level as a floor.

All at once they came out into a larger cave, a chamber about twenty feet wide and perhaps twice as deep, all to be plainly discerned, for the place was fairly well lighted in some mysterious way, although where the light came from they could not make out.

No more shots, no further alarm of any kind disturbed them for the next half hour, and they had plenty of time to study the mystery of the light.

It was not very bright, just about the brightness of a moonlight night.

It seemed to fill the whole space of the cavern, but where it came from they could not discover. Every foot of the wall was explored, but there was no break except the passage by which they had entered.

"It's the most mysterious thing yet," declared the Unknown. "There's only one explanation—the light comes down from above."

But this was an explanation which did not explain, for there was no roof to the rocky chamber, as far as could be discovered.

There was no use in speculating on the matter evidently,

so they gave it up and settled themselves down for the night.

Edith spread her blankets behind a projecting rock and Dick his on the sandy floor of the cave.

Young Klondike and the Unknown settled down to watch near the entrance.

Here they sat talking for a long time, with everything as quiet as possible about them. It looked as if there was to be no further trouble, at least before morning.

"You better turn in, Ned," said the Unknown along toward midnight. "I don't feel a bit tired. I can just as well watch alone until along toward morning, and then I'll wake up Dick."

"I don't like to leave you alone," replied Ned. "Who can tell what may happen?"

"Don't you fret; nothing will happen till daylight."

"You ain't sure—you can't be, and—listen! What's that?"

Suddenly a sharp whistle sounded through the cave.

It was immediately answered by a shout in a thundrous voice, which echoed and re-echoed back from the rocks.

"Aye! Aye! We are all ready to begin," were the words.

"Great heavens! What is it?" gasped Ned, seizing his rifle.

"Hush!" breathed the detective. "Not a sound! They may be right upon us. Still, I don't think they are."

They listened with wildly-beating hearts, expecting every moment to see their enemies come bursting out of the gloom.

But nobody appeared as the moments passed.

Strange and startling sounds could be heard, though.

They seemed to proceed from far above them. It was as if a great number of men were scrambling over rocks.

"What does it mean?" whispered Ned.

"It means that we are not alone here, for one thing. That's sure."

"Alone! I should say there was a regiment up there."

"It don't follow. I think it is more than half the echo."

"That don't seem possible."

"You'll find it is so. I don't believe there are more than half a dozen of them."

"But who are they? Who can they be?"

"Claim jumpers, of course. Some gang working a lead here and keeping dark on your account, Young Klondike."

"Shall we wake up Dick and Edith?"

"Not yet. There is no need. I tell you, these people are not in the cave; they are somewhere overhead, wherever their mysterious hiding place may be."

"It's all a mystery. I can't understand it. We ought to be on the lake and instead of that here we are inside the mountain listening to we don't know what."

"You can thank your stars we ain't on the lake a night like this, then. I firmly believe if we had attempted to cross over to Golden Island we would have lost our way in the storm and perished. We may congratulate ourselves on our good luck being here. Hello! What's coming now?"

All at once a great pounding began.

It did not need any one to tell Ned and the Unknown what that meant. It was the ring of hammers upon a miner's drill.

Now this sound in itself carried with it nothing startling and fully explained the character of the mysterious people near them, but when it came to the echo added to the ring of the hammers on the drill, that was quite another thing. It doubled, trebled, quadrupled the sound.

The whole cave rang with it until the ring and roar became fairly deafening.

Dick and Edith were soon wide awake and joined Ned and the Unknown.

"What is it, Ned?" cried Edith in the first excitement of her awakening.

"He! Ha! Don't wonder you ask!" chuckled the Unknown. "It sounds as though some one was trying to punch a hole through the mountain."

"There's prospectors at work up there, that's all," said Ned. "They are sinking a hole, Edith, and pretty soon they'll blow it."

"Talk about your noise! What will it be then, when the blast comes?" cried the Unknown. "If they don't bring the whole mountain down about our ears they'll do well."

The detective strained his eyes to get a sight of the mysterious miners, but all in vain. Nothing could be seen of them, but the sounds kept right on.

It was certainly very strange, for quartz mining—or mining in the solid rock—is very unusual in the Klondike country.

There by far the larger part of the gold is taken out of the gravel which lies some twenty feet down below the frozen soil.

But quartz mining pays well when you strike a good "pocket," as it is termed.

Let us explain, for any one having in mind a trip to the Klondike ought to be posted in all the different ways in which the gold is to be found.

Placer mining is digging loose nuggets and dust out of sand and gravel in the beds of old streams which have dried up or of streams still running.

In this wonderful Klondike country vast areas carry placer gold. On the banks of Klondike river and the creeks which run into it, such as Bonanza, El Dorado and others, one can dig almost anywhere with a tolerable certainty of finding a rich return.

Now, all this gold is supposed to have been washed down from the mountains, which are crossed and recrossed with quartz veins, all carrying mixed with the quartz more or less gold.

Some of the richest mines in the world are quartz mines, but to find a quartz vein does not necessarily mean gold. The quartz may be "barren," as it is termed, and in any case gold seldom goes with it on the surface.

On the other hand, if one strikes a good "showing" on the surface it is a fair indication that better lies below, and the way to get at it is to sink a shaft over the vein and then, when the rich "pay streak" is discovered, to make a tunnel, or drift, along the line of the vein.

This is the way to strike "pockets," or points on the vein where large quantities of gold are concentrated.

There are a few such claims being worked in the Klondike country and their number is bound to increase, for a quartz mine, if good for anything, is apt to be a permanent source of wealth, whereas a placer mine is soon worked out.

This explanation is necessary to understand that which is to follow, and it is just as well that we should make it now, while Young Klondike and his friends are standing there in the cave listening to the ring of the hammers upon the big drill.

For more than half an hour the sounds continued, with a few breaks, and then suddenly ceased. All listened, but they did not begin again.

"They've got the hole in," said Ned.

"Sounds so," replied the detective, "but I should think we ought to hear them moving about."

"We'll hear enough in a moment," replied Ned. "Next thing they'll be blowing it. You'll want to hold your ears then."

When the hole has been drilled to the required depth the method of blasting is to ram down into it one or more cartridges of dynamite or rend-rock and touch them off by means of a fuse sufficiently long to enable the miners to get out of the way.

This was what Ned anticipated, and all listened eagerly, expecting to hear sounds which would tell them that the explosion was coming.

But they could not hear a breath, and after a full half-hour's wait it began to look as if they might give it up when all at once came another sound which brought everyone on the alert at once.

It was the sharp bark of a wolf over toward the entrance to the cave.

"Hello! There's one of our old friends come to pay us up for stealing the caribou!" cried the Unknown.

Again the bark was heard and then again. Others joined it, the echo caught the sounds, and they were repeated from all sides.

"There's going to be trouble here," said the detective. "Edith, get your gun ready; there's got to be some shooting done here before long."

"All ready!" said Edith. "If the wolves are coming, let 'em come!"

"Hadn't we better go out through the passage a little way and meet them?" asked Dick. "It might be an ugly business to have a hundred or more wolves come suddenly into the cave."

"There can't be that many!" said Ned.

"Listen to the racket they make! It sounds as if there were a thousand."

"It's the echo."

"Don't be too sure," said the Unknown. "The wolves are out there—they are coming. I think Dick is right, and we'd better go and meet them, unless, by the Jumping Jeremiah, it's too late!"

Suddenly a fearful yelping was set up, sounding close to the end of the passage.

As Ned peered into the darkness he could see many pairs of gleaming eyes staring at them.

They were coming forward, too, but slowly, as wolves always move when doubtful about the strength of their enemy.

"It ain't too late! It's just the time!" cried Ned. "Edith, let 'em have it!"

"Hold on! What would you do?" exclaimed the Unknown, catching Ned's rifle. "Not until we have to, Young Klondike! Our shot may bring worse enemies than wolves down upon us! Let me go forward; perhaps I can start them. Once they get the scare, a pack of wolves will turn and run like a flock of sheep."

"Don't think of it!" cried Edith. "They will tear you in pieces! We've got to shoot."

"Wait! Wait! Let me try it! Remember, they can see us better than we can see them. Shoo! Hurroo! Get out, there, you snoozers! Shoo! Shoo!"

Thus shouting, the Unknown pulled off his plug and rushed into the passage, waving it wildly.

Although Young Klondike did not expect it, the move had its effect.

Startled by the cries and the waving hat, and perhaps by the apparition of the stumpy little man, bareheaded and in big boots, which he kicked out toward them energetically, the wolves turned tail and retreated along the passage.

"What did I tell you? They are all on the run!" cried the Unknown.

He started to return when all at once the mountain was shaken by a thundrous explosion.

The noise was deafening and the shock tremendous.

Instantly the light vanished and great masses of rock came whirling down from above, falling all about them.

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" yelled the Unknown. "Ye gods and little fishes! The whole rock is coming down! The wolves are upon us and I'm cut off! Help! Help! Help!"

It was a most startling situation.

Right in front of the entrance to the cave a huge mass of rock as big as a house had fallen.

The force with which it struck the ground threw down Ned, Dick and Edith. Before they knew it they were sprawling on the sand, while the shouts of the Unknown and the wild barking of the wolves added to the general din.

But, fortunately, no one was hurt—mere luck, for the floor of the cave was strewn with the fallen fragments from the rocks above.

Ned was the first on his feet.

"Zed! Zed!" he shouted. "Try to climb over! We can't help you! Look out! There's a wolf! Fire, Edith, if you can see to get a shot!"

It was impossible to see anything now, for the cave was wrapped in almost total darkness; yet a pair of gleaming eyes could be discerned alongside the fallen rock.

"Fire!" yelled the Unknown. "I'm on top! Fire now and give me a show!"

Edith blazed away and a sharp yelp was the answer, the eyes instantly disappearing.

"Hooray! You've done the business for that fellow!" cried the Unknown, and down he leaped off the rock, for he had managed to climb to the top on the other side.

"There's another!" cried Dick.

"Bang!" went Edith's gun again, and another wolf went howling away, but the shot seemed to arouse all the others of the pack, and there arose a most fearful barking in the passage beyond the rock.

"There's a hundred and more there!" cried the Unknown. "We've got to keep them back. Anybody hurt here? Dick, Ned, where are you, boys? Edith talks with her rifle, so I know she's all right."

"We are all here in good shape!" answered Ned. "You're the one we were worried about. Good heavens! what an explosion it was!"

"Tremendous! I thought the whole rock was coming down, high as it is. It beats me who can be operating here."

"We've got to find out. High Rock, as I'm going to name this place, belongs to me and I propose to claim it," replied Ned. "Hello! There's another wolf! See those eyes?"

They could all see the gleaming eyes in the narrow passage between the rock and the wall.

Before Edith could fire Ned let fly, and successfully, for again the echoes were awakened by the barking of the wounded wolf as it drew back out of the hole.

This was only the beginning; for two long hours Young Klondike and his friends stood guard there, fighting the wolves.

As many as twenty were driven back wounded or dead, it was hard to tell which.

Four times a wolf succeeded in getting into the cave.

Of these, Edith shot two dead and Ned and Dick each did for one.

At last the end came. The wolves seemed to hold a council and give it up, for all at once there was a fearful howling, long drawn out, and then they could be heard retreating along the passage.

After a moment all sound died away and through the long hours of darkness which followed the prisoners in the cave were not again disturbed.

CHAPTER IV.

"It's coming, Ned! We're going to have daylight in a moment and you can see for yourself that this cave has no roof. The opening goes straight up to the top of the rock."

"That's what it is," said Ned, looking up as Dick pointed, for daylight was creeping in over the ragged ledges far above them and never was the sight of it more welcome than it was now to Young Klondike and his fellow prisoners in the cave.

Soon it was light enough to see everything, and Ned had a chance to realize how wonderful had been their escape from the falling rock which lay strewn round them in every direction.

"We want to get right out of this fearful place," said

Edith. "I wouldn't put in another night here if you'd offer me a million dollars. What's that? Rain?"

"That's what it is," said Ned, as a splash of water struck his face. "It rains like everything, too. Strange we haven't felt it before."

"I think the wind must have changed suddenly," said Dick. "We'd better make a move while we can, if we can only get Edith up on top of that rock; that's what's bothering me."

But Dick's "bother" proved to be entirely unnecessary.

Ned climbed up on top of the rock without any great difficulty and Dick and the Unknown between them managed Edith, Dick standing against the rock and the detective helping Edith to climb on his shoulders; then Ned caught her hand and helped her up, and the drop down on the other side was easy enough.

"Gracious! Didn't our rifles do good work last night?" cried Edith, as she looked down into the passage.

"I thought you'd be surprised," answered Ned. "There's twenty of them. See, some are half eaten. I guess the wolves got enough of it before they quit."

The dead wolves lay scattered about all over the passage. The sight was not a pleasant one, and as soon as Dick and the Unknown came over they all hurried through to the open.

No sign of an enemy, either four-legged or two-legged, here.

"The great amphitheatre was not white with snow, as they had expected, but on the contrary entirely clear, for it had been raining nearly all night and was now pouring in torrents, and yet until the last moment not a drop had struck them in the cave.

But Young Klondike's party was not afraid of rain, and then and there they started off through it. Now that it was daylight, there was not a bit of trouble in finding the pass through which they had come and in a short time they were out on the face of the mountain, with the frozen lake lying at their feet and Golden Island easily seen in the distance.

Now came the most tedious and trying part of their journey. The ice was covered with slush and horribly slippery. Three times the Unknown's legs went out from under him and down he went splashing into the slush.

Dick got two falls and Ned went down once himself, but Edith was fortunate enough to keep her feet, and at last they reached the island, meeting with a rousing reception from Mr. Ring and the miners, for they had grown very much alarmed over the long absence of the "boss."

"By thunder! I'm glad to see you back again, Mr. Golden!" said the foreman. "If we had known at all which direction you took I should have started after you last night; as it was, we kept the flashlight burning till nearly daylight, though I did not expect to see you after it began to snow."

This brought out Ned's story of the wonderful light at High Rock and all the rest of it.

The men, who had quit work, crowded around to hear the story of the boss, and many were for going right over

to High Rock then and there to investigate the mystery, but no move was made until the following day.

Then Young Klondike determined to know all there was to be known about his mysterious possessions on the other side of Black Lake and started off at the head of a force of twenty men, well supplied with provisions, mining tools, tents and everything necessary for a long stay in the "sink," as the deep hollow outside the cave was called in the language of the Klondikers.

It was a cold day compared with the one preceding and the slush on the ice had frozen solid during the night. The Unknown led the way and they had no difficulty in finding the canyon which led them into the sink. Here everything looked just the same as when they left it.

There was not a trace of a human being anywhere, and it was hard to believe that there could be any large party on High Rock or in the sink.

As soon as the tents were up and a big roaring fire built, Dick and several men started back up the mountain to get the dead caribou, which they found all right on the tree, while Ned, with the Unknown and Edith and several others, set out to find a way up on to High Rock.

For more than an hour they kept up the search and then had to give it up in the end.

High Rock proved to be a most remarkable natural curiosity.

It rose right out of the sink, which Ned was not long in discovering, and the level ground extended half a mile or more beyond it.

The first thing they did after making this discovery was to go all around the rock, but at every point it rose perpendicularly.

The Unknown declared that even a billygoat could never climb it.

There it stood in the middle of the sink like some gigantic sentinel, fully a thousand feet high and perhaps a quarter of a mile through, so when you come to think seriously of these dimensions you can see what a gigantic affair it was.

Next thing was to explore the cave.

No trouble in seeing all now, for Ned's party took powerful reflecting lanterns in with them.

These were flashed about in every direction, but all in vain.

They could see the sky away up at the top, but the opening seemed to be comparatively small, which accounted for the rain not coming in the night before. But as to there being a way of getting up to examine into the mystery, if there was any, Ned could not discover it, and he and the Unknown examined every inch of the rock.

That night over the camp-fire there was a big lot of discussion about the mystery, you may be very sure.

Some of the miners, being full of superstition, began to talk about ghosts and to wonder if High Rock was not haunted, and although this brought the laugh on them from their companions all right enough, it was not so easy to laugh them out of their silly fancy, and there were some wakeful eyes in camp watching for the shadows to appear on High Rock, but the night passed and nothing was seen

of them; while as for the wolves, their experience of the night before probably made them shy, and they also kept away.

Ned and Dick were up long before light, for at this season to wait for dawn before beginning work is to accomplish nothing all day.

At a little after seven the boys started for High Rock alone, Ned carrying his rifle, a spade, a pickaxe and a pan, and Dick two powerful reflecting lanterns.

Edith and the Unknown were supposed to be still sleeping, and except the cook of the party and the sentinels there was nobody else astir.

"Going off prospecting, boys?" asked Bill Bradley, one of the guards, as the two boys passed him.

"That's what we are," replied Ned. "Looks kind of crazy, don't it?"

"Blamed if I can understand where you can expect to find any digging. Everything is frozen up as tight as a drum."

"We know," laughed Dick.

"Mebbe you do; but mark my words, you'll make no strike."

"Don't you be too sure," replied Ned. "Just wait till we come back, and then you'll have a chance to talk to some purpose; but you haven't got it now."

Young Klondike and Dick walked on to the entrance to the cave.

There was no trouble about going straight through, for the afternoon before the big rock had been rolled aside.

"Do you really think we're going to strike it, Ned?" asked Dick as they found themselves in the cave once more. "It seems to me just about as poor a place as a man could possibly prospect. I don't blame Bill Bradley a bit for talking the way he did."

"Nor I, either, as far as that goes," answered Ned. "But all the same, I do expect to strike it, or I shouldn't be here now."

"But what have you seen to make you think there is any hope?"

"Can't you see?"

"No, I'll be blest if I can."

"Take a good look around, Dick. You want to get onto the little details of this new business of ours."

"Ned, I don't understand what you mean."

"I see you don't; I'm going to explain. It was our old friend Barney McGraw, up on the Klondike, who put me onto this."

"Barney's a good miner. What he don't know isn't worth knowing."

"Exactly; and you know that we have struck good pickings in caves more than once."

"Of course."

"Well, Barney says that you'll never strike a cave in Alaska that you won't find that some time or other a creek run through it. To be sure it may be all filled up with sand, but it has been there, and as to get into a cave it must come down through the rocks, and more than likely pass a dozen quartz veins more or less gold bearing, you ought

to be able to strike a good pot of nuggets in the beds of these old creeks in nine cases out of ten."

"By Jove, I believe Barney is right."

"It's proved so in our case, Dick."

"So it has. But where's your creek here? I don't see a trace of it."

"Then that's because you don't look sharp. It's right under your nose."

Dick looked every way but the right one, and after all Ned had to point out to him a faint line of indentation running across the sandy floor.

"You think that was once a creek?" asked Dick, dubiously.

"I do; I'm sure of it."

"Looks kind of doubtful."

"You'll find it ain't a bit doubtful. Come, let's fire away."

"Speaking of firing, we ought to have a fire, hadn't we? This ground is frozen hard."

"Hard, but not deep, Dick. You see it's so sheltered here in the cave."

"All right. We'll go at it. We've got it all to ourselves, and it won't take long to prove whether you are right or wrong."

Throwing off their thick coats, they seized their picks, and were just about to begin the attack on the frozen soil when a diabolical, blood-curdling laugh rang out through the cave which brought them up with a round turn.

"For heaven's sake! what's that?" gasped Dick.

"Don't ask me! Listen! listen!" whispered Ned.

Again the laugh was repeated.

This time it seemed to come from far above them, just as all the other strange sounds had done.

"Well, it beats the band what it all means," said Ned. "Still, I ain't going to let it rattle me a bit. We are here to make a strike if there's one to be made, and I'm going right to work."

"And let the laughter laugh himself out."

"Exactly so; but he can't laugh me out of the cave."

Ned raised the pick again and dug it into the frozen ground.

He had come to a very sensible conclusion. To have given it up then would have been very foolish, for although the boys worked away for a full hour the laugh was not heard again.

Just as Ned predicted, the sand was not frozen to any great depth here in the cave.

Three feet brought them to the end of the frost, and after that it was all easy work.

They soon discovered the walls of the old creek, for on each side at a certain distance they struck stones, while in the middle it was all sand, running down for a depth of some six feet, when they struck gravel.

"Hooray! Here we are!" cried Dick, tossing a shovelful out of the hole.

Ned was on top, shoveling away the sand which had been thrown out, in order to make room for the gravel when it came.

"No nuggets there, Dick?" he asked.

"Don't you see any?"

"No."

"No more do I; but perhaps they lie deep. We'll try it again."

Out came several shovelfuls of the gravel, which Ned carefully sorted over, but not a trace of gold could be discovered.

"It don't look very promising," said Dick dolefully, "but I'll try it again."

This time he dug the shovel deeper and tossed it up with a joyous shout, for the glint of gold had caught his eye in the lantern's light.

"Color!" he cried; "color at last!"

"That's what's the matter," said Ned. "It looks like a strike, sure. Give us another shovelful, Dick."

Ned dropped on his knees and began poking over the gravel, while Dick tossed up two good shovelfuls out of the hole.

"Here we are!" cried Young Klondike. "We don't need to go any further; we've made a strike!"

And Ned held up a big nugget, as large as a walnut, of solid, yellow gold.

CHAPTER V.

THE THREE BIG STRIKES IN THE SINK.

"This is the talk, Dick. We couldn't ask for anything better than we've got right here."

"I should say not. How many nuggets are there now?"

"One hundred and sixty-three."

"So! What's the value?"

"It can only be guesswork."

"Of course. Give your guess."

"Averaging them at an ounce?"

"Ain't that too high?"

"Well, no, I think not; some run a lot more, and I don't think there are any that go less."

"All right. Fire away."

"Multiply a hundred and sixty-three by seventeen and you have it."

"Twenty-seven hundred and seventy-one."

"Exactly. Pretty good for a morning's work."

"Yes, and before breakfast. What will the Unknown say when he hears it?"

"He'll say it's all right," cried a thunderous voice from the depths of the cave.

"For heaven's sake! what was that?" breathed Dick, seizing his rifle.

"Ha! ha! ha! Ho! ho! ho!"

Once more the diabolical laugh rang out through the gloom.

"It's the Unknown! He's playing tricks on us! He's hiding somewhere, sure," cried Ned.

He flashed the lantern overhead.

"Come out of that!" he shouted. "Show yourself!"

"There he is!" cried Dick, pointing up on the side of the rocks.

Sure enough, there was the Unknown, waving his tall hat.

"How the mischief did you get up there?" shouted Ned.

"That's tellings, Young Klondike. Leave the old detective alone for finding out things and solving mysteries."

"Have you solved the mystery of the cave?"

"Partly; not altogether. You'll know more later."

"Oh, tell it, tell it! We want to know now."

"See you later; good-by."

And that was all the satisfaction they got out of the Unknown then, for he drew back out of sight and was gone in an instant. But as the boys stood there shouting to him a bright light flashed all over the cave.

They gave it up then and hurried out into the sink, carrying their nuggets and tools with them.

When they reached the camp everybody was thrown into the greatest excitement by the find.

The men were for going into the cave and beginning operations at once, and instead of holding them back, as another might have done, Ned let them go.

"Pitch in, boys, and see what you can make out of it," he said. "Every ounce you find until we get ready to return to Golden Island belongs to you, but you must leave me two men to stand guard outside here in case anything should occur."

"Hooray for the boss!" they shouted, and there was a great rush for the tools, and then a mad break for the cave.

This was the way Ned maintained his popularity among his men.

His treatment of them was always most liberal, and the result was that he never had the least difficulty in hiring all the miners he wanted; whereas other large claim owners could not get them for love or money, and that at a time when there were hundreds of starving prospectors wandering about without cash enough or brains enough to make a strike for themselves.

Edith now came out of her tent and they all sat down to breakfast, and while they were discussing the find the Unknown came sauntering leisurely up.

"Hello, you old scamp!" cried Ned. "That was a nice trick you played us! How did you get up there? Tell it right out, for we want to know now."

"Oh, you do, eh? Well, you won't, then. I never tell my business till I've finished the job, and this one ain't done yet."

"Have you been up on top of High Rock?"

"No, sir; not yet."

"Then how did you get where we saw you?"

"Tell you later, after I've got to the top of the rock."

"You are just too provoking for anything, Zed," declared Edith. "You know we are all dying for some explanation of the mystery, and here you won't tell us a thing."

"That's right."

"I say it's wrong."

"You ain't a detective, my dear Edith. If you were, you'd put it just the other way."

"Well, I ain't going to get down on my knees to you, anyhow," said Ned. "If you don't want to tell you don't have to."

"I'll tell you one thing, though, Young Klondike."

"I ain't asking."

"No, but I'm telling."

"Do as you like."

"I intend to. Did you see that light after I disappeared?"

"Yes."

"I made it."

"How?"

"Ah! I thought I'd get you to asking again. I did it just with an ordinary lantern—this one I've got here in my hand."

"How? Your explanation don't explain."

"Right you are. Let's change the subject. I've been having a great time up there all to myself, for I didn't strike a living soul."

"That's what I wanted to ask you," said Dick.

"Not a sail nor a trace of any one."

"It's very strange," mused Edith. "I suppose you mean to take us up there sooner or later, Zed?"

"All in due time, Edith. Just wait till I've finished my job."

And that was all they could get out of the Unknown that morning, and shortly after breakfast he disappeared again.

The boys knew him too well either to interfere or to get angry, so they just let him go.

Going into the cave themselves, they found that the miners had widened out their prospect hole and dug several others on the line of the old stream.

The result was amazing.

Already big panfuls of nuggets had been taken out, but as yet there was very little dust.

"That lies lower down, boss," said Bill Bradley. "We are sure to strike it. In my opinion this is going to be one of the richest claims found yet."

"Fire away; make all you can out of it," said Ned. "I'll give you another strike before the day is over, but I want three men, and every man who works for me to-day shall be paid in proportion to what the rest of you find here; that I guarantee."

"What's your scheme now, Ned?" asked Edith when they went out of the cave.

"Same as before. I've located another old creek bottom and am going to try my hand at that."

"Blest if I can see it, then," said Dick.

"No?"

"No, sir."

"Look around. As I told you before in the cave, it's right under your nose."

"I don't doubt it. You've given more attention to this locating business than I have, Ned. You'll have to explain."

"I can do it easy enough. Don't you see the deep gully there in the side of the rock?"

"Plain enough."

"Well, you can rely upon it that at some time or other a creek started down through there. That was before the rock broke away from the mountain, as it did at some time or other. Of course the water ran off over the sink on this side; perhaps there were rocks here then, but if there were it ran under them, and that's the channel it took."

Ned pointed to a depression in the frozen ground.

Following this with the eye, one could see that it took a regular course, passing over toward the mountain on the other side.

"It certainly seems to be the bed of a creek," said Edith.

"That's what it is; the boss is right," added one of the men.

"Of course I am," said Ned. "Now, boys, I tell you what you do: Start three prospect holes on the line of that old channel and I'm ready to guarantee that each one of them will pan out rich!"

It needed nothing more than Young Klondike's suggestion to start the ball rolling.

Wood was collected and big, roaring fires built to draw out the frost.

This is necessary at all seasons of the year on the Klondike, and with the exception of the first foot or two on top the ground was not frozen any harder now than it would have been in July.

But it was hard enough, and Ned's boast that he would have three strikes before night was not realized.

By the time darkness settled down upon the sink the prospect holes had only been sunk four feet and new fires were burning in them.

Bill Bradley declared that the entire twenty feet would have to be burned out, the usual depth at which strikes are made in the Klondike, and so it proved, for it was afternoon next day before the prospect holes were below the frost line.

Ned and Dick worked with the others and part of the time Edith lent a hand.

The Unknown was off all the morning, as he had been the afternoon before, and, finding him just as uncommunicative as ever, the boys did not press him as to where he had been, for they knew that it would be of no use.

At precisely half-past two the first strike was made in the three prospect holes, occurring in the one Ned was working with the help of one of his men.

Several pans of dark, coarse gravel had been washed out without a nugget or even a color, when Ned, who was doing the washing, getting water from a great kettle hung over the fire, which was kept supplied with ice to melt down, reported dust.

Dick, Edith, the Unknown and in fact all hands crowded around him.

"It's here; it's certainly here," said Young Klondike in answer to Dick's exclamation that he could see nothing, and so it was there, sure enough.

After the last of the sand was washed out there was a little collection of coarse flakes lying at the bottom of the pan among the gravel.

"We've got it, boys! Leave me alone to do the rest. Get back to the other holes."

"I'll bet I'll have a thousand dollars before you do," said Dick.

"Go for it! Edith and I are going to work."

"And I ain't," said the Unknown. "I'm off again, but I'll bet I make the biggest strike of the lot in the end."

"Go on; we don't want you," laughed Ned. "If you get on top of High Rock, sing out."

"You'll hear from me if I do. I'm going to get there, too, and don't you forget it. So long."

And off went the Unknown again, leaving Ned and Edith to work the pan and Dick to peg away at his prospect hole.

Ned took the pickaxe and worked down a foot deeper. "We've struck bed rock," he exclaimed suddenly. "We ought to strike it rich here if we are going to do it at all."

"Give me a shovelful; I'll shake it right out now," said Edith, and then in a few moments Ned got the call to come up out of the hole and see.

"By Jove! It's there!" he exclaimed. "A lot of it! There must be as much as half a pound of gold in that pan."

He had hardly spoken when a shout from Dick, who was panning, too, attracted their attention.

"We've struck it, Ned! We've struck a big pocket!" he called. "Come here."

Then came a fair example of the fortunes of mining, for Ned's find dropped into obscurity the instant he looked down into Dick's prospect hole.

Here bed-rock had been reached, and the sand all around it was literally bristling with golden flakes, mixed with sizable nuggets here and there.

It bore every evidence of being a strike of immense value; but this was not the end.

No panning being necessary to demonstrate the richness of the find, Ned and Dick, with the men who had been helping them, now turned their attention to the last of the three prospect holes, where the third man had been working alone, and they soon had this down to bed-rock also; and to the immense satisfaction of all it turned out to be an extension of Dick's pocket—to all appearances it was richer, if anything.

A few pans were washed out, yielding over six thousand dollars.

By this time it was dark again, and as it was rapidly growing colder and becoming more difficult to work, they gave it up for the day and went into the cave to see how the miners in the first strike were getting on.

"Boss," said Bill Bradley, "there ain't no claim like this nowhere on the Klondike. Just look at that pile of nuggets, and remember that we ain't struck dust yet."

"We must weigh these," said Ned; and they did, for the gold scales had been brought along.

The value of the nuggets footed up over twenty thousand dollars, and when Young Klondike announced the result, adding, "It's all yours, boys, and you get all day to-morrow, and perhaps next day, too, to keep at it," the shout that rang out through the cave was deafening.

It was "Bully for the boss!" and "Hooray for Young Klondike!" on all sides.

"What's become of the Unknown?" asked Edith when they all sat down to supper. And she had no sooner said it than he walked into their midst.

"Oh, I'm always on hand when there's any grub going, and don't you forget it!" he exclaimed. "That's right;

make a place for me. I'm all ready to eat, but not to talk."

But this hint was only for the benefit of the miners, for as soon as the meal was over the Unknown gave the word to Ned, Dick and Edith to meet him outside the tent.

"What have you struck?" asked Ned.

The Unknown held up his finger mysteriously.

"Not here," he whispered. "It ain't always best to let everybody know your business. Walk with me over to High Rock, where there's no chance of our being overheard. I strongly suspect I've made the biggest strike of the lot, big as yours seems to be."

CHAPTER VI.

GOLD BY THE BUCKETFUL.

"Now, then, out with it, Zed!" said Young Klondike once they were safely under the shadow of the rock.

"Ned, we're not alone here."

"I'm sure of it; we've got about a dozen men with us."

"Oh, I don't mean that, and you know it well enough. There are others besides our party here at High Rock."

"I know that, too; I've been sure of it from the start. How could we think otherwise after the night we put in there in that cave?"

"Exactly. That was the way I reasoned, and I set out to find who our neighbors were and what they were about."

"And did you?"

"Not exactly."

"You have seen people?"

"Not precisely."

"You have been to the top of High Rock, at least?"

"Not altogether."

"Come! come! What in thunder do you mean? You do love to puzzle us and keep us in suspense."

"Well, that's unfair when I've been working like a naylor to solve this mystery. But let me answer your questions in my own way, Young Klondike. I haven't found out who our neighbors are, but I have found out what they are about."

"And what?"

"Mining."

"Not very surprising; we might have guessed as much."

"Naturally."

"Next you asked me if I had seen the people, and I said, 'Not precisely.' I haven't seen them, but I've seen them working."

"Worse than ever! Your explanation don't explain."

"Explanation will come later, dear boy. Next you asked me if I had been to the top of High Rock, and I told you I hadn't. And no more I have; but I've been so precious near the top that there's no fun in it, and not on the outside, either, and that's where the stick comes in. I can't get out on the top. If I could I'm sure I'd find our neighbors, but of course there must be some way out, and that's what we've got to find next."

"I think we've had about enough of this mystery and argument," said Edith. "Zed, I'm cold—too cold to stand around here fooling. If you don't come to the point I'm going back."

"Ah, that settles it! If my lady says I've got to come to the point, I'll have to come. Follow me."

Now this began to look like business, and they followed the detective along the face of High Rock.

He led them away around on the other side, stopping at last where a deep gully entered the face of the rock to a distance of some ten feet or more.

Now Ned had carefully explored this gully when they first made their examination of the rock, but without finding any means of ascent.

At least he thought he had, but he was entirely mistaken; for there, plain enough to be seen by the lantern which Ned had now lighted, was a series of natural steps leading up on the face of the rock. These were concealed behind a big fallen fragment, around which, on their previous visit, they had not gone.

"Why, this is just what we want," said Dick. "It will take us right up on High Rock."

"Yes, but not to the top," replied the detective. "I only wish it would. I felt sure that it would at first, but that's where the best of us get left sometimes—feeling too sure."

"That's what's the matter," replied Ned. "Lead on. Show us how far up we can go."

The Unknown sprang up the steps in lively style, considering his big boots, and Ned helped Edith to ascend.

It was pretty hard climbing and decidedly dangerous, but at last they came up with the Unknown, who was standing on a broad shelf far up on the side of the rock.

"So far so good," he said. "What do you think of that view, Edith? Isn't it a picture for an artist, now?"

It was wonderful to look off at the mountains as they lay spread out before them, peak rising above peak, many white with snow, bathed in the pale light of that wonderful Arctic star display.

"It's prettier by daylight," said the detective, whose artistic taste was rather limited, "and we've no time to spend gazing at it now. Just you follow me."

The Unknown hurried on to the end of the shelf and passed behind a projecting spur of rock leading the way into a natural tunnel some twenty feet in length, which brought them out into a small cave.

"Is this where we saw you?" asked Ned.

"Yes; softly, now. We want to make as little noise as possible if we are going to discover anything, for I haven't the least doubt that every move we make has been watched and every loud word we speak is overheard. Look here."

The Unknown led them further on and all in a moment they found themselves at the edge of a precipice.

Edith drew back with a shudder.

"Heavens! What a dangerous place!" she gasped. "Where are we looking—down into the cave?"

"That's exactly it. The boys saw me up here."

"Yes, and heard you, too. You nearly scared the life out of me," added Dick.

"The echo of this place is wonderful," said the Unknown. "I didn't speak much above my ordinary voice. I don't believe you heard me the first time I spoke, either. Here one's words are echoed and re-echoed, each time louder

and louder until it gets to be the thunderous sound we heard that night."

"I'd like to try it," said Edith.

"Not now! Don't think of it. What I'd like to do is to put that light out."

"Don't think of it!" said Ned. "Do you want us all to break our necks?"

"It is just because I don't want you to break your necks that I don't try it. No, 'tain't safe, though we shall have to do it in a minute, and even then I am afraid we shall have waited too long, and my plans will all be spoiled."

"I suppose it's no use to ask you to hurry up and explain your plans," replied Ned. "We've just got to be patient and let you do business in your own way."

"I'm going to get a move on me right now, dear boy. Follow me. It ain't much further."

Thus saying, the Unknown led the way over the rocks and passed into another chamber of the cave. Here he paused and pointed still further on.

"See that place where the rocks are all broken and jagged?" he whispered. "Well, that's where the blast was fired. Look along and you will see another ledge overhanging the cave. It's my opinion that's the hole we heard them finishing, and it was the last of several and that all were fired at once. Of course, I don't actually know this, but I have no doubt I am right."

"I believe you," said Ned. "You can see where the holes were sunk. Where do we go now?"

"We don't go. We stay right here and wait for the light. That infernal mining in the cave has kept everything back. I had to wait till it was all over before I gained my point. I lay here on the rocks nearly all day waiting and watching, but I got there in the end."

"Wait for the light? What do you mean?" asked Dick.

"Oh, I'm going to explain in a minute; but first of all look over there."

The Unknown pointed to the wall on the other side of the chamber, and they now saw that it glistened like the polished surface of a mirror.

"There you are!" he exclaimed. "That's what filled the cave with light. See how our lantern reflects on it. I tell you, boys, that's one of the greatest natural curiosities on earth. When I was on the island of Borneo, in '82, I saw——"

"No you didn't!" broke in Ned. "You just quit that! I don't believe you were ever on the island of Borneo in your life; but that needn't hinder you from telling us what all that shiny stuff is."

"Mica," replied the detective, with the real laugh he always gave when Ned called him down. "It's mica, and if we had a shipload of it in the States it would be worth a fortune; but now you've seen all there is to be seen here, and out goes the light."

"Must we stay here in the dark?" asked Edith, dubiously.

"That's what we've got to do if we expect to see anything, and even then it's doubtful."

"Tell me," said Dick; "do you suppose what we are saying now is echoing through the cave?"

"No; I don't think it. I figure it out that one has got to be close to the ledge to lean over and throw the voice down. When I was here that first day I tried it on half a dozen times, but you didn't pay any attention. When I leaned over the ledge and called, though, you were up in arms at once."

"Out goes the light if you are ready," said Ned; "but what are we expected to see?"

"I'm all ready. Put it out. We've got to wait for the other light to come, and we may wait half the night and see nothing, for all I can tell."

Ned extinguished the lantern, and all seating themselves on the rock, the long watch began.

An hour passed and nothing had occurred. The detective permitted them to talk in whispers, but they did not keep it up long, and although the silence grew almost painful, it was not broken until suddenly the mysterious light flashed upon the wall of mica and the chamber was lit up from one end to the other.

"There!" breathed the detective. "It has come at last."

All waited breathlessly.

After a few moments the same sharp whistle was heard again.

It was immediately answered by a similar whistle coming from far below them, and yet the sound did not seem to come from the cave.

"It's going to begin now," said the detective. "Of course I can't tell you if you'll see what I saw, but I expect it. Just you wait."

They had to wait several moments, and then a shuffling sound was heard overhead and a bucket attached to a stout rope came whirling down from above, shot past them and seemed to go right into the rock.

"A shaft there?" whispered Ned.

"Yes, and one so deep that I couldn't see the bottom of it," replied the detective. "I don't know whether it is natural or whether it has been sunk by our mysterious neighbors, but there it is."

"And the bucket has gone down?"

"Of course. Watch till you see it come up, then you'll open your eyes."

They had to wait about ten minutes. Then the rope was shaken and immediately it began to run through the pulley above—if there was a pulley, as the detective assumed—and after that the bucket flew past them loaded to the brim with golden nuggets.

It went up out of sight in an instant, and again all was still.

"There!" whispered the detective excitedly. "What do you think of that?"

"Amazing!" said Edith.

"Beats the band!" exclaimed Dick.

"The place where that gold came from is on my land," declared Ned, "and I mean to know the whole story."

"Of course we've got to find it out somehow," replied the Unknown; "but how the deuce we are to do it beats me."

"I suppose you've tried every way in the world to get up there?" asked Ned.

"Every way I could possibly think of to get up, or down,

but I can't make it go. However, we must be patient and keep working; our chance may come yet."

"There comes the bucket again," said Edith.

They watched it as it went whirling down, and then in a few moments saw it come up again loaded down with gold as before.

Again and again the process was repeated, and finally the light was suddenly extinguished and the bucket came no more.

"That ends the programme for to-night, sure," said the Unknown. "Come, it's getting cold here and we may as well go down."

As a matter of fact the thermometer had dropped almost to zero, but so interested had they been in watching the bucket that no one had noticed it.

Lighting the lantern, the Unknown led the way down off the rock, and that ended the adventures of the night.

CHAPTER VII.

TWO MORE BIG FINDS ON THE OLD CREEK BED.

Next morning the sun got up at its usual late hour and found our Klondikers all hard at work.

Nobody waits for daylight in Alaska during the winter months; to do that means nothing done.

That morning there was a shifting sound of men.

Those who stood guard and worked for Young Klondike during the previous days now went into the cave and mined on their own account, others coming out to take their places.

Thus it happened that Bill Bradley was with Ned that day.

The Unknown disappeared as usual immediately after breakfast, saying that he was going to continue his explorations, and Edith being busy with affairs of her own in the tent, Ned and Dick went out with the miners alone.

"Tell you what it is, boss," said Bill Bradley, "I s'pose you know a lot about mining; you'd ought to, since you've made more lucky strikes than any one on the Klondike, but I believe I could give you a wrinkle on this here place if I was to try very hard."

"I wish you would then," replied Ned.

"Kinder hate to, though. Seems as though you'd orter know all there is to be knowed about the business."

"Not at all. There are none of us that know it all."

"Yes, but look at the big strikes you've made right here. Could they be beat? I rather think not; and yet I seem to see a chance that you haven't taken yet."

"Out with it, then. Of course if you know anything I don't, I want to know it. What chance do you see?"

"Well, now, it's just like this: supposin' you're right about this here being the bed of an old creek. Wouldn't it stand to reason that the most gold is to be found in the lowest point?"

"Of course."

"That's it. Then why haven't you worked it?"

"What do you call the lowest point?"

"Don't you see them rocks over there? Ain't that it?"

Bill pointed over toward the south wall of the sink a few hundred feet away.

Here at the foot of the mountain a quantity of loose rock had fallen; it lay piled up as high as a man's head and extended back against the wall.

"What makes you think that's the lowest point?" asked Ned. "The ground don't show any slope."

"Why," said Bill, "it's plain enough. This here old stream coming down off of High Rock ran across the open and worked its way in under the mountain, or between the ledges, to speak more truly. What was the result? Down the rocks came tumbling and filled up the hole it made. That there's the lowest point we can reach, and it's there the best chance of making a rich strike ought to be."

"Perhaps you're right. Suppose you take your men and go for it," replied Ned. "You understand, Bill, that it ain't my intention to work any of these claims until I can hire more men, which may not be under a few months. Of course the more strikes we make the better, and I'll tell you this much, if you strike it rich here you shall be the boss of the work when we begin it, and on most liberal terms."

"That suits me all right," replied Bill. "I won't take no great time to get them stones away. Shall I let the other holes go and begin right on this?"

"I wish you would."

"It's as good as done then. We'll go right at it now," said Bill, and calling his men together, they started in to remove the stones.

This left Ned and Dick out, for without help they could do nothing toward prospecting, so they determined to do a little exploration on their own account as soon as the sun rose.

Where the stones had been broken away from the side of the mountain ascent was comparatively easy, and Ned determined to go up and see what could be found.

Accordingly he and Dick, arming themselves with their rifles, a pickaxe, a spade and a pan, climbed up over the rocks, coming, after they had gone up about two hundred feet, to a broad, level stretch some hundreds of yards across and fully half a mile in length.

This was an unexpected discovery, for there was nothing to indicate it below.

"By gracious, what a place for a fort this would be!" exclaimed Dick. "Two or three men could hold out here against a regiment—why, Ned, look over there!"

Dick stopped short and pointed over to the wall where the tableland ended.

"Silver!" cried Ned. "A mountain of silver!"

It looked it. The wall for a long distance was of dazzling whiteness, the rays of the sun reflecting back from it as from the polished surface of a mirror.

"It can't be silver!" said Dick. "No, no! It ain't that; it's mica, such as we saw on High Rock, or else it's ice."

They hurried across the tableland to examine, and found that Dick's last suggestion was the true one.

The whole face of the rock was one glare of ice, extending upward to a distance of several hundred feet.

"I suppose there's a pond up on top there, and it's overflowed and frozen here against the rock as it fell," said Ned.

"That's it. One thing is explained anyhow."

"Which is what?"

"The shadows we saw thrown on High Rock that night."

"I wouldn't wonder. Put two men here with a strong light behind them, I suppose their shadows would be thrown on the rock."

"Of course; and how easy they could fire down at us. The only wonder is that we escaped."

It seemed to offer a very satisfactory explanation of the mystery of the shadows, and the discovery set the boys to wondering why the place should have been visited by the unknown inhabitants of the sink.

"Of course they had a reason for climbing up here," declared Ned, "for they couldn't have known we were coming into the sink that night."

"Gold is the only reason worth considering, Ned."

"I quite agree with you. Probably they have made a strike here."

"Could there be a better place to look for one?"

"Hardly. That ice means water coming down over the rocks in the summer time, and it's ten to one gold is washed down with it."

"Suppose we start a prospect hole right here?"

"I'm agreeable. We'll take it where those stones are; that's about the middle, and the land seems to slope that way from all sides."

The point indicated was about a hundred yards from where they were then standing, and when the boys got over to it another discovery was made by Dick.

"Ned, this is very strange," he exclaimed.

"What is?"

"Why, what becomes of the water that flows down over the rock?"

"Sure enough. There's no trace of it here."

"Trace—yes; you can see the channel it has worn for itself, but the deuce of it is it ends right here at this big flat stone."

"It must run under it then."

"Of course it must. There's no other way."

They tried to raise the stone then. It did not seem too heavy for two men to lift, and yet the boys could not stir it, although they tugged and pulled for all they were worth.

"It beats me," said Dick, all breathless. "From the size of that stone I thought I'd be able to lift it alone."

"Certainly we ought to be able to do it together. It acts just as if it was fastened down on the under side."

"That would seem to be impossible."

"I tell you nothing is impossible in this strange place, Dick. That's just what it is, and you may depend upon it. We've got work to do here."

Young Klondike then threw aside his coat, and taking the pickaxe, worked it in under the stone and tugged and pried at it with all his strength.

No use. The stone wouldn't budge an inch. He could not even loosen it.

"Down goes a prospect hole right here, Dick," declared Ned, and having made up his mind to do it, no time was lost in carrying the plan out.

Leaving their tools where they were, Ned and Dick de-

scended into the sink again and told Bill Bradley of their discovery.

"I want all hands," he said. "I want to see a hole down there inside of a couple of hours if such a thing is possible. Mining in the cave can wait."

Now, with such a force as Ned had at his command, it was possible to do a great deal.

The men in the cave were called and a great fire was built all around the stone, and as the frost came out of the ground all hands went to work with crowbars and picks to break up the frozen soil.

"I'll have that there stone up for you in just about two shakes," declared Bill Bradley. "Here, boys, lend a hand. The ground is soft enough now. Drive the bars in under it. That's the talk! Now then, all together and up she comes!"

Then there was force enough thrown upon the bars to raise a dozen stones, but it did not even start this one.

"It's fastened below, that's what's the matter!" declared old Bill.

But they now abandoned this idea, for half an hour's digging showed that the stone went down to a considerable depth.

Then Bill asserted that it was ledge rock, and Ned was inclined to believe him.

Work on the stone was abandoned and Ned ordered his force divided into two parties.

"We must get ahead," he declared. "If there's any further strikes to be made I want to make them and know the whole story. You fellows had better work on the two prospect holes to-day and to-morrow and get down to bed rock. You shall have two days work in the cave on your own account to make up for it later on."

This means quick work, but even that was too slow to suit Ned and Dick.

A force was put on the prospect hole under the stones and another on the tableland, but it was late in the afternoon the following day before bedrock was reached in either case.

It happened that Ned and Dick were at work with the gang on the lower hole when they made their strike.

"Here's your gravel, boss!" exclaimed Bill Bradley, turning up the last clod of frozen earth at a depth of twenty-two feet.

The boys bent down eagerly to inspect the showing.

"I can't see anything," said Ned.

"No, nor I either," declared Dick.

"Nobody says there's color here," answered Bill; "but we may as well work out a few panfuls and try it. Bet you a quarter it will prove richer than that hole of yours up on the mountain, boss. I don't look for anything at all there."

"Don't you be so sure," laughed Ned. "Give me some chance on my hole, Bill."

"Oh, this is yours too, boss. They're all yours. The whole place is yours. I should never have thought of looking for gold here if you hadn't started in on it. I'm only drawing comparisons against the two prospect holes."

"They say comparisons are odious, Bill."

"Bet your life! You ought to know. It's odious to try

to dig up a stone what reaches down to China, and that's what the boys are doing up there on the hill."

Having thus expressed his thorough contempt for Ned's operations on the mountain, old Bill loaded down a bucket with the newly found gravel and it was hoisted up. Another and another followed it, and then all hands went up to do the washing, which might have been satisfactory enough for a beginner, but it didn't suit Ned at all.

About twenty dollars in coarse dust was left behind in the pans after the washing was over.

Several other pans were tried, the yield proving to be in the same ratio.

Old Bill Bradley was greatly chagrined.

"Well, there's your fifth strike, Young Klondike," he said. "It ain't such an almighty big one, is it? I suppose you'll blame me for wasting all this time."

"Not at all," replied Ned. "I'm glad to know how the gold runs in all parts of the sink. Of course it wouldn't pay us to work this prospect hole, though, with the cave and No. 2 and especially No. 3 ready for us."

"I should say not."

"How do you feel about No. 6 now, Bill?" asked Dick.

"Meaning the one up the mountain?" replied the old miner.

"Yes."

"Don't see no reason to change my mind. I don't believe there's no gold there."

"Well, we'll soon know," said Edith, who had come up in time to be a listener to this conversation, "for here come the men now."

Ned looked up and saw the gang coming down over the rocks.

"Hello! What have you fellows got to report?" he called out.

"Nothing!" the foreman shouted back. "We've got down on top of bedrock, boss, but there ain't no gold there."

Bill Bradley was triumphant, and Ned, it is hardly necessary to say, greatly disappointed, for somehow he had set his mind on making a big find there on the mountain.

After supper the Unknown came in.

He had put in a quiet day on High Rock, there being no work in the cave, and was greatly disappointed not to be able to report some fresh discovery.

"There wasn't a thing done all day, Young Klondike," he said as he and Ned with Dick and Edith were having a talk in the tent.

"Didn't you see the bucket go down?" Ned asked.

"Not once. I watched for hours; there wasn't a sound."

"Don't you think I'd better tell the boys all about it and start in for a general exploration of the place to-morrow?"

"No, no! Not yet. It will only result in nothing. By the Jumping Jeremiah! if I can't find our mysterious neighbors, they can't. Anyway I want another chance."

"Take your time," said Edith. "You'll get there in the end, Zed."

"But it's the risk he runs that's bothering me," said Dick. "I haven't forgotten those shots on our first night here."

"And you don't want to lose the crazy old Unknown, do

you? Well, well; it wouldn't matter much! I begin to think I'm no good."

"Time! Don't get off on that strain," laughed Ned. "Look out for yourself, that's all. And now, to change the subject: We didn't make much out of strike No. 5."

"I was afraid you wouldn't. How about No. 6?"

"Worse yet," said Dick. "The men who came down from there to-night reported just nothing at all."

"I wouldn't trust to their report; Young Klondike is a better judge than any man in Alaska, British America, Greenland, the north pole, or——"

"Hold on! That will do now!" broke in Ned. "Of course I'm very much obliged to you for your compliments, and if it wasn't so cold I'd take my hat off to you."

"S'pose instead of doing that you keep your hat on and we all go up on the mountain and take a look at that hole and your wonderful stone which won't come up. I haven't seen it yet."

"I second that motion," added Edith. "I haven't seen it since they got the hole down to any depth."

"You never could get up there in the dark, Edith," said Dick.

"Don't you fret. I'd like to bet I could."

"Of course she can," said the Unknown. "Show me the place where Edith can't go and I'll show you one where nobody can go. Come on, let's try it; we ain't ready to turn in yet, and we've got to spend the time somehow between this and bedtime."

It was this proposition of the Unknown's which spurred Young Klondike on to make his sixth strike.

Taking their rifles and each one a lantern, they started up over the rocks.

It was rough climbing in the dark, but they managed it without difficulty, and certainly Edith handled herself a great deal better than the Unknown, with his big boots, who went stumbling about at great risk of breaking his neck.

When they reached the stone they found that a prospect shaft six by four feet had been sunk on the right side of it, the "stone" forming one of the end walls down to the depth of nineteen feet, where the ledge came in.

As there was a short ladder in the hole, all hands went down to have a look.

"Ye gods and little fishes! It's no wonder you couldn't raise that stone," chuckled the Unknown. "You might as well have tried to raise the whole mountain. What was that ghost story you were giving me about Bill and the men being able to get their bars in under it?"

"So they did," replied Ned. "Don't you see the dip it takes there, about two feet down?"

"Well, there is a dip; yes, I see."

"Plenty of room for the bars to go under it, but of course we were all mistaken about its being a stone."

"Here's the gravel all right," said Dick, kneeling down. "I don't see a trace of color, though."

"What a sharp dip the ledge seems to take toward the wall," remarked Edith. "It's a straight break; it looks as though our stone had been cut right down or was a separate piece standing on the ledge."

As she spoke Edith took up a crowbar which had been left by the miners in the hole and struck it against the wall, with a hollow sound.

"What in thunder! That ain't so solid as I thought for!" cried the detective.

"It certainly sounds hollow," said Dick.

Perhaps the water coming down off those rocks washed out a hole inside there," said Ned. "That's what the noise seems to mean to me."

He took the bar out of Edith's hands and struck it against the wall with all the force he could muster.

There was a cracking sound and a great square of rock flew inward, to be heard tumbling down into depths beyond with a hollow, rumbling sound.

"There's your cave!" cried the detective. "Just as usual, Young Klondike was right."

Ned caught up the lantern and flashed it into the hole.

"Well, well!" he exclaimed. "What do you think of this? Look! A chain!"

There it hung, coming from the darkness above and extending down into the darkness below.

"And a ladder," said Dick, peering over Ned's shoulder.

"I'll be hanged if there isn't a ladder!" cried the detective. "By the Jumping Jeremiah, you're right again, Young Klondike! "There never was such a fellow in all the world for being perpetually right as you are. There's some way of raising that stone, after all."

There could be no doubt about it. There was the ladder and there was the chain. They had broken through the thin wall and thus by the merest accident made this remarkable discovery.

"Hold your lantern, Young Klondike. I'm going up that ladder!" the Unknown exclaimed.

"And down," said Dick. "I go up first."

"No, you don't. It's my discovery and my first go," declared Ned; and he asserted his claim by ascending the ladder until he had his head right under the mysterious stone.

Here he found that it was the chain which held the stone down, just as he had supposed. It passed through an iron ring, which with no little labor had been driven into the stone, and extended down into the gloom below.

There were four other rings, two driven into the stone and the other two into the ledge on either side of it, each carrying a stout hasp, which passed through the first pair of rings, holding the stone in place.

Ned loosed them and easily raised the stone off its bed.

Thus the mystery was solved so far, but exploration of that strange shaft, which seemed to be entirely natural, by the way, was yet to come.

"Of course we all go down the ladder but Edith," remarked the Unknown, as Ned descended to rejoin his friends.

"Well, I rather guess Edith goes, too," she exclaimed.

She never thought of such a thing as staying behind and was quite indignant with the Unknown for suggesting it.

"Of course she's coming with us," said Ned. "The

idea of Edith holding back! She can climb a ladder as well as you or I."

"Oh, it ain't that," said the detective. "Edith can manage the ladder all right. It is what we may strike when we get to the bottom that's worrying me."

"I'll take chances," said Edith, decidedly. "Don't you dare suggest my playing rear guard again. I'll shoot a hole through your old plug hat if you say another word."

"Indeed! Well, in the face of such a dire calamity as that I'm dumb," declared the Unknown.

Ned then started down the ladder, followed by all hands, Edith bringing up the rear.

They managed to carry their rifles and lanterns, and it was such awkward climbing that Ned was only too glad to find that the distance they had to go was short, not over twenty feet, in fact.

The ladder ended before a narrow opening which seemed to have been cut through a gravel bed lying in a deep depression in the rock.

Here the chain was passed through another ring in the shaft wall and secured by a padlock.

"It's their way out!" cried the Unknown. "Young Klondike, I believe we've struck it at last and are going to find our way up on to High Rock."

"I ain't prepared to say that," replied Ned, "but it's sure enough that we've struck something else."

"What?"

"Look and see."

"Look where?"

"There, in the gravel."

"Thunder!" cried Dick. "I see. It's gold!"

And so the sixth strike did amount to something after all.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE WILD MEN IN THE CAVE.

"There's more or less gold mixed with the gravel all up and down the wall here," said Edith, as she flashed her lantern on each side of the passage. "I don't believe it would compare with either of our other strikes, though, except, of course, No. 5. It is better than that."

"No. 5 don't amount to shucks," said Ned. "That one don't count at all."

"That's what's the matter," added Dick. "Still I don't think it would ever pay us to work this unless we were dried up elsewhere."

What a wonderful country is the Klondike, to be sure!

Here was a mine which would have driven an old Californian crazy.

In the days of '49 such a discovery would have caused a rush from all sides, and here was Ned Golden and his friends turning up their noses at it, for everything goes by comparison, and under existing circumstances it certainly would not have paid Ned to work this claim.

But what lay beyond?

That was the question, and exploration of the mysteries of the passage was now in order.

The detective led the way—he insisted upon it.

"It's the right of my profession," he declared, "and I'm not going to be forced to take a back seat for any one."

So he went along waving his lantern in front of him, followed by the others, who held their rifles ready for instant use.

The passage through the gravel was only about eight feet, and this was evidently artificial.

When they got at the other end of it they found themselves in another cave, just as they had expected, and here came traces of their mysterious neighbors again.

There was a great heap of gravel which had evidently been taken out of the passage, and, moreover, there was every evidence that this gravel had been carefully panned for whatever gold it might contain.

That it had been worked from the end at which they now were was evident, so the thing to do was to continue their explorations and find out what lay beyond.

Then came a long walk through the cave, which was not more than thirty feet wide, with high, rocky walls on either side.

It did not run on a level, but was constantly leading them down, until at last the Unknown declared that they must be down to the level of the sink.

He had no more than made the remark when the descent ceased and the bottom of the cave became as level as a floor.

They continued on thus for a while until it seemed to Ned that if they were going in the direction of High Rock they must certainly have reached it, when all at once a sharp whistle sounded through the cave on ahead.

"Stop!" breathed the detective. "It's just as I thought. We've struck our mysterious friends under High Rock."

They all listened attentively.

For a while everything was quiet, and then all at once Ned saw a strange shadow flit across the line of the lantern's light far ahead in the cave.

It was the figure of a man, tall, bareheaded and dressed all in rags.

For an instant the strange figure turned and looked at them, then throwing his hands high above his head with a half despairing gesture, he vanished in the gloom.

"Come, that's something," exclaimed the detective. "By the Jumping Jeremiah! It's a relief to know that after all there are human beings in these underground passages, for I had begun to wonder if we weren't dealing with ghosts."

"Ghosts be hanged," cried Dick. "I gave you credit for better sense than that, Zed. Hello! There he goes again."

Once more the strange figure was seen to spring across the line of light.

"It ain't the same," said the detective. "That's a shorter man than the one who went by before."

"Surely there can't be two," declared Edith.

"But there are, though. I tell you it ain't the same."

"I'm sure you're right," declared Ned; "but let's watch and see if your ghost appears again."

"Oh, that's no ghost; don't you fret yourself. I have a strong suspicion that one of those fellows is my man, though what can be more likely than that, knowing the sleuthhound is on his track—that's me, Edith—he has gone into hiding in this cave?"

"Shut up!" said Dick. "Give us a rest on your man."

"I wish I could get a rest on him myself, my lucky boy. Here I've been following him all over the world for years until nobody will believe that he exists, and—ye gods and little fishes! We've got to hustle or be shot!"

The ring of a rifle caused the detective to break off short in his complaint, startling all hands as well, for the shot was instantly followed by another and another, and nobody was able to see from where they came.

"That's business!" cried Ned. "Evidently the cave dwellers don't intend that we shall go any further."

"That's what's the matter," said the detective. "If we could only get sight of them. Edith, keep your eye peeled; there may be another shot."

But there wasn't. Of course the lights had been extinguished. They waited breathlessly, expecting to hear the rifles speak again, but no sound came to break the silence.

"That's only a bluff," said Dick.

"Nothing else in the world," declared the detective. "They don't mean that we shall come any further, and I don't believe they have any intention of killing us. It's my opinion they could have done that long ago if they had been so disposed."

"Hark!" said Edith. "It seems to me that I can hear footsteps. It's horrible to stand here in the dark expecting to have those wild men pounce upon us at any instant."

"I thought I heard some one a minute ago," said Dick; "and then it seemed to me that I must be mistaken."

"Hush! Hush! Listen!" breathed the Unknown. "I do hear some one right now."

Listening there, it seemed as if all could hear stealthy footsteps approaching at one minute, and then in the next there was such utter silence that Young Klondike thought they must be mistaken. Determined to know the truth, he struck a match and lit the lantern.

Edith gave a quick exclamation, clapped her rifle to her shoulder and fired, for there right in front of them were the two men.

As the rifle rang out one uttered a wild yell and both went running off into the darkness at full speed, while Edith fired again, but with no intention of hitting them, as she afterward admitted.

"Let's get out of this," said Ned. "It ain't safe. We'll get back to camp and bring the men down here and explore the cave from one end to the other."

They hurried back by the way they had come, the detective keeping a sharp lookout behind them, but no one had been seen up to the time they reached the foot of the ladder.

Now all began to breathe more freely, it must be admitted, but Dick was disposed to growl and talk about running away.

"That's all right," said Young Klondike. "There's no use in taking too big a risk. We want to keep the firm together if we can."

"But," said Dick, "we were just on the point of making a discovery, and here we are on the dead retreat."

"He who fights and runs away may live to fight another day," said the Unknown. "I suppose you have heard that

wise saying, Dick? Young Klondike is right. Taking too big chances ain't going to pay us; better get on up the ladder, Ned. I'll guard the rear."

Ned sprang for the ladder and hurried up through the shaft, never dreaming of the painful surprise which awaited him at the top.

As he drew near the upper rounds he caught the glimmer of starlight above him and saw that the stone had been lifted from the opening, and yet he was positive that he had put it back in its place—something very easily done, by the way, for that part of the stone which formed the trap door, so to speak, was only a small square block fitting into the larger stone which they had first tried to move.

"Say, Ned, some one's been at work up there since we left," called Dick.

"That's what! It must be some of the men from camp. Hello, up there! Hello!"

Suddenly the opening was darkened, and Ned caught sight of the face of Oliver Owens, one of the miners and a man whom he had long distrusted.

"That you, boss?" Owens called down.

"Yes, yes!" shouted Ned. "Who's with you, Oliver?"

"Two or three of the boys. Boss, have you made another strike?"

"Yes," replied Ned, hurrying on up the ladder, feeling a curious uneasiness which he would have found it hard to explain.

"Then stay there and work it!" cried Owens. "We'll take care of the rest!"

Down dropped the stone over the hole.

"What in thunder does he mean by that?" cried Dick.

"Treachery! Treachery! By the Jumping Jeremiah, treachery!" called out the detective. "Look out for yourself, young Klondike! Oh, if I was only on top instead of where I am!"

Ned covered the remaining rounds in a moment, but before he reached the top he knew that the Unknown was right.

He could hear a big boulder rolled on top of the stone.

It struck upon it with a thud which shook the ladder and then all was still.

"We are penned!" gasped Ned. "Oh, Dick! I didn't suppose there was a man in camp who would use us so."

"It was Oliver Owens, wasn't it, Ned?" asked Edith, so quietly that you never would have supposed that anything unusual had occurred.

"That's who it was, Edith."

"The treacherous sucker! Does he mean to murder us?" stormed the detective.

"Ned," said Dick, "we've been followed. The plan is to have us disappear mysteriously and then Owens expects to persuade the men to stay here and work our big strikes for themselves."

It was perfectly evident that Dick's explanation was only too correct.

All in vain Ned tried to lift the stone.

He might just as well have attempted to move the mountain, for the stone was held as firmly in its place now as though it had been the ledge of rock, as they first supposed.

The horrible truth was plain.

They were prisoners here underground, with no prospect of escape by the way they had come in.

What other chance remained it was impossible to say, but it meant another interview with the wildmen beyond all doubt.

"Humph! We may as well go down again. There's no use standing on the ladder all night," said the Unknown, philosophically.

They descended to the level in silence. Ned set his lantern down and leaned against the rocks.

"I wouldn't have believed it," he exclaimed, "After all I've done for those men! To think that one of them—and Oliver Owens above all others—would serve me such a trick!"

"It's disgusting," said the detective; "but that's what human nature is, and the older you grow the more you'll find it out."

"Isn't Owens the man you bought the clothes for, Ned?" asked Edith.

"Yes, he is. I found him starving in Dawson—literally starving, and with hardly clothes enough to keep him from freezing. I was warned against him when I first hired him, but he told such a pitiful story that I was fool enough to take him."

"It's a shame!"

"It's worse! It means all sorts of trouble; but we'll have to face the music."

"Bill Bradley can't be a party to such dirty business," said Dick.

"I hope not; in fact, I'm sure not."

"Don't you be too sure of anything," exclaimed the detective; "but come, there's no use crying over spilled milk; here we are and here we are likely to stay, as far as I can see. What do you say—shall we push on and see where the passage leads us, or shall we put in the night here?"

"Thunder!" cried Dick, suddenly. "What fools we all are! What's to hinder us from getting out the way we came in?"

"Sure enough!" said Young Klondike. "Do you know, I was so excited that I never even thought to look at the hole in the wall."

But this hope was instantly swept away.

"No go, Young Klondike," said the Unknown. "It wouldn't have done you a bit of good if you had."

"What do you mean?"

"That the hole is stopped up, too."

"Are you sure?"

"Dead sure. Would I have been up to my business if I hadn't looked? I thought you saw it, of course."

"I'm going to make sure, though! I can't rest till I do!" cried Ned, and away he went up the ladder again, followed by Dick.

Of course the Unknown had made no mistake. The hole was completely obstructed by a big stone.

"It's another of those big boulders which lay around on top there," said Dick, dejectedly. "No use, Ned."

"We might dig under it."

"How could we work from the ladder? It would be

next to impossible, and even if we succeeded in cutting through the wall, it's ten chances to one that the boulder is big enough to fill up the entire hole."

"I suppose likely it is," said Ned, gloomily, "and I don't suppose there is much chance we could crawl under or over it. Well, well; this is a great state of affairs, to be sure!"

"Tain't like you to despair, Ned."

"And you bet I ain't going to, Dick. I have no such idea. We've been in some pretty tight snaps since we left New York, you and I, and we've always worked out some old way; we'll manage to work out of this."

"And don't you forget it. Let's go down."

They had just started to descend when an exclamation from Edith startled them, being instantly followed by a shot.

"What is it?" shouted Ned, looking down.

"The wildmen! The wildmen!" cried the Unknown. "Let 'em have it again, Edith. There they go!"

Ned and Dick were too far up the shaft to see those two strange figures running off into the darkness without even attempting to return the shots.

CHAPTER IX.

THE SEVENTH STRIKE.

"That settles it! By the Jumping Jeremiah, that settles it! We don't stay here. We've got to explore this mystery to the end or bust."

This was the conclusion the Unknown had arrived at, and before he expressed it Ned had determined upon the same course.

"Oh, certainly," said Edith; "we've got to do it. I never could sleep a wink with those two creatures liable to drop down upon us at any moment, and as to shooting the poor wretches, I could never think of such a thing."

"I dare say it would have been better if you had," replied the detective; "but I didn't blame you a bit. I couldn't do it myself; but you see our warning shots don't scare them for a cent; they keep creeping up on us. Something has got to be done, and that's sure."

"We'll push right on into the cave and take our chances," said Young Klondike.

"My idea, dear boy. I s'pose you find things up there about as I said?"

"The hole is stopped up, yes."

"And by a big boulder. I tried to push it away with my hands, but I might just as well have tried to push down a house."

"We tried it, too," said Dick. "It can't be done. It's just no use at all."

"Which brings us right down to business," said Edith. "Shall we start now, Ned?"

"We may as well. Look to your rifle, Edith. All may depend upon you, and remember, if we get in a tight box warning shots don't go."

"You'll find me all right when the time comes, Ned."

"I'm sure of it," said the Unknown. "Ladies and gentlemen, we are now about to explore the mysteries of this cave; be good enough to follow me."

Shouldering his rifle and carrying the lantern in his disengaged hand, the Unknown started off into the gloom.

This was the time that Ned began to feel nervous, not so much on his own account as upon Edith's, for he now sincerely regretted his folly in starting out upon any such expedition at night.

The way seemed shorter now, and they were soon down upon the level again, and up to the time they reached the place where they had first discovered the wild men nothing had occurred.

"Now we enter upon unknown dangers!" said the detective. "Heavens, how my heart beats! How my limbs tremble! Is this fear or what is it? Am I about to encounter my man here in the bowels of the earth and at last have the pleasure of snapping the bracelets upon him? Ha! the prospect is too rich for my blood! It is overwhelming! It is——"

"Shut up!" broke in Ned. "This is altogether too serious a matter to make fun of. Who can tell what we are going to strike?"

"Sure enough! I hope we may strike gold, Young Klondike. Far be it from me to indulge in any unnatural levity. I am out for business—for the dust, for escape from this dungeon, for my man and the glory of nailing him, for ——"

The sudden ending of the cave put a period to the Unknown's long-winded speech, which would have seemed silly enough to any one less well acquainted with the man.

To the surprise of all, they came out upon a sandy floor which stretched away a few hundred feet, surrounded by towering crags, forming a perfect amphitheatre, with no apparent outlet except through the cave.

For a moment all stood gazing about in silence, for, seen under the starlight, the place was most peculiar, and Ned and Dick had never viewed anything like it; but the Unknown broke the silence with a contemptuous sniff.

"Humph! Only another sink," he exclaimed. "I suspected this. Where do you figure it out we are, Young Klondike, or haven't you any idea?"

"If you want my opinion, we are in the middle of High Rock."

"That's mine, too."

"How can it be?" asked Edith.

"Who told you High Rock was a solid mass, my dear?" replied the detective.

"I supposed it was."

"Of course. Let me tell you that supposes don't go here in the Klondike. What we are after are facts—cold facts. And don't we get them sometimes? Oh, no; not when the thermometer was fifty-five below freeze last winter my poor frozen ears were not cold facts—not at all!"

"Quit it! Quit it! I want to get down to business," cried Ned. "Do you really think we are in the middle of High Rock?"

"I do. Where else would we be?"

"Why not in the mountain on the other side of it?"

"We haven't gone far enough for that."

"I don't suppose we have; it must be the rock, as you say."

"And why not? We know that there's a thundering big cave in the rock; why not another break like the one we are in now and are likely to stay in till morning, for all I can see."

"Here was reasoning altogether unanswerable, but there was some further discussion of the question, although, of course, no conclusion was to be arrived at.

As complete an explanation of this new sink as was possible at night was now made, but no way out was discovered.

"We've got to wait for daylight, that's all there is about it," said Young Klondike. "Thank goodness, it's ever so much warmer here than it is outside."

"It's cold enough anyhow," said Dick. "Edith had better go into the cave and lie down, hadn't she?"

"I wouldn't do it for a thousand dollars," declared Edith. "I don't care whether I get any sleep or not; but I'm certainly not going to lie down in that horrible hole and take the chances of having the wild men pounce down on me."

"But you'll freeze to death out here," said Ned.

"How about the rest of you?"

"We shall keep more or less on the move."

"We'll keep together, anyhow. I'm so warmly dressed that if I was to sit down on the sand and lean my back against the rocks I believe I could sleep without getting so very cold."

It is hard to imagine any one sleeping under such circumstances, for the thermometer was far below freezing; but Edith did it, and after a while Dick sat down beside her and went sound asleep, too."

But Ned and the Unknown kept wide awake and fully on the alert.

"What do you think of all this, Zed?" Young Klondike asked, as they paced up and down the sandy floor of the sink.

"Want to know my opinion?"

"Of course, or I should not have asked it."

"Then I think that our seventh strike is going to be the biggest one yet."

"What makes you think that?"

"Because I'm dead sure that we are going to find the place where that bucket of gold was hauled up from. Remember, we were away up on the rock then and now we are at the bottom of it; that's where the gold came from, dear boy."

"It all sounds reasonable; but who are these wild men?"

"Oh, just a pair of prospectors who have struck a good thing and mean to hold on to it. Probably they know all about the Jennings patent and have just kept pegging away and mean to scare you off if they can."

"Bareheaded and in rags this weather?"

"Who says that's the way they go all the time? Who was telling you that they didn't rig up that way just to fool us?"

"Nobody, of course. It may be as you say."

"It is. They've struck it rich, and that's the whole secret. Say, Ned, of course they could have killed us if they had wanted to. You understand that?"

"It seems as though they might. Edith could have hit them if she had chosen."

"It's a game of bluff all around, that's what it is. Don't you fret yourself. We'll get out of this snap."

"If I ever do, let Oliver Owens look to himself," said Ned, bitterly. "If there's any law on the Klondike he shall feel its full force."

"To the dogs with Klondike law! What's the matter with Judge Lynch?"

"I believe in the law."

"So do I—in lynch law for such a scoundrel as he is. Don't you fret; the boys will avenge us when they learn the truth."

They had now reached the opposite side of the sink and were just about to turn and walk back again when Ned's attention was suddenly attracted by a faint glimmer of light, which seemed to shine out through a crevice in the rock very close to where they stood.

He called the attention of the Unknown to it, and so faint was the light that the detective might have gone off without observing it, sharp as he was.

"It's either the cave or the mysterious miners," he at once declared.

"Let's listen. Perhaps we can hear something," suggested Ned, clapping his ear to the crevice.

It was some moments before he caught the faintest sound, and then, instead of hearing voices, as he half expected, it was only a noise like the rattling of a rope.

"It's the miners, Zed," he whispered. "As true as you live they are at work in there."

The detective listened.

"You're right," he replied after a moment. "There goes the bucket up. Now we know one thing: we are on the side of our old cave, and if the boys work in there to-morrow I believe we can make them hear us."

"It ain't likely."

"I say it is; but we won't wait for that. I tell you what the thing is, Ned. Those fellows have concluded to leave us alone and they are going on with their work; we must get in where that light is if we can."

Now this was something easy enough to talk about, but decidedly difficult to do in the dark.

The search for an opening in the wall amounted to nothing then, but when daylight came at last—and it came without the least alarm having occurred—Young Klondike met with better success.

Matters had now become desperate, for all hands were getting horribly hungry, and unless they could find some way out of the sink starvation would soon be staring them in the face.

This was what made Ned suggest a new examination of the wall all around the enclosure.

Starting from the cave, Edith and the Unknown went one way and he and Dick the other, and as it happened they came first to the place where the light had been seen the night before.

"Here's where the opening ought to be, Dick," said Ned, "and if it ain't found here I shall be very much surprised; let's be particularly careful; my idea is that there is another

passage leading into the rock. You see it might be easily closed up with a big stone like this one here, and—thunder! I've found it! Here it is!"

It was the merest luck! Ned never dreamed of such a thing when he took hold of the big, loose rock which lay against the wall and pulled on it.

To his surprise the rock rolled over and there was an opening about large enough for a man to crawl through. They could see daylight beyond; the passage was apparently no more than ten feet in length.

"Sure, that's it," breathed Dick. "Shall I call Edith and the Unknown?"

"No, no. Let us finish our job first. I'm going right in to see what lies beyond."

"Look out for yourself, Ned."

"Never you fear. Give me my rifle, Dick. I ain't a bit disturbed about this business. Will you come after me?"

"Well, you can just bet I will. I ain't letting you go in there alone."

It would seem as if High Rock was fairly honeycombed with caves and sinks, for all in a moment Young Klondike found himself in another of those strange circular openings.

It was a sink, of course, but a very small one; the distance across the floor was not over twenty feet.

Ned crawled into it and scrambled to his feet with an exclamation which might easily have been heard outside.

"By gracious, Dick, here's the seventh strike, and it's a dandy!" he cried.

Half the floor space of the sink had been dug up; there was a prospect hole some twenty feet deep right in front of where Ned stood.

Down into this hole a rope descended from the rocky wall high above them. There was a bucket attached to the rope, and various mining tools lay scattered around, but most interesting of all was a great heap of golden nuggets lying on the bottom of the hole.

"We've struck it at last!" breathed Dick. "We've hit the nail square on the head! What will the Unknown say to this?"

"If he says what's true he'll have to admit that we've got ahead of him and have found what he couldn't. Dick, this is just immense."

"Yes, if we can hold it."

"Hold it! What are you talking about? Ain't it all ours? I guess yes!"

"Of course it's ours, but we've got to get out of this snap first."

"Here's a way out. If that rope is fast above I can go up hand over hand to that chamber where we watched the bucket."

"And have the wild men cut the rope while you are on it? No, sir! None in my plate if you please; besides, there's Edith, and I don't believe the Unknown could ever get up by that rope."

"What's the matter with my going around and raising the stone? But, come, there's no use in discussing what will only be tried as a last resort; first thing is to get down among those nuggets and see what they are like."

Thus saying, Ned caught hold of the rope and tried it, finding it firm enough so far as that went.

He then dropped down into the hole while Dick kept a sharp lookout.

"This is the richest hole ever I saw," called Ned. "I don't believe there's anything on the Klondike to touch it."

"Seems to me I can see the nuggets sticking right out of the gravel."

"They are there, lots of 'em—thousands of 'em. Dick, this mine will be worth a mint of money to us."

"I don't suppose there ever was a more inconvenient one to work."

"It's bad enough, but that can be managed. All we need is a steam hoist and a little rigging and the whole business is done."

"Meantime we want a few pans of those nuggets to take out and show to Edith and the Unknown."

"That's what. We're right about it! Hello! It's snowing again."

The storm had swept down upon them suddenly, as these Arctic storms have a way of doing, to the great discomfort of the Klondikers.

Of course the boys could see very little sky, or they would have perceived its approach, and now down came the whirl of flakes with such earnestness that it threatened to bury everything in a very short time.

"By gracious! it means business, don't it!" exclaimed Dick. "It will be a bad job if it keeps up long; then there'll be nothing for it but to take refuge in the cave."

"Can't be helped," said Ned, who was busy filling the bucket. "I'm scraping in nuggets just now and don't care."

The bucket was now full, and Dick drew it up, pouring its contents into an old pan, of which there were several lying around.

Again Ned filled it and still again, but without making any perceptible difference in the bulk of the pile in the bottom of the hole. After that he caught the rope and pulled himself up out of the shaft.

"That's what's the matter," said Dick. "We've a snug little pile right here and—hello! Ned is getting scared."

"Ned! Dick! Where are you, boys?" the Unknown was bawling from the other sink.

"He'll have the wild men down on us sure," said Ned. "Hurry out there, Dick. I'll follow with the pans."

Dick crawled through the hole and when Ned got out there was Edith and the Unknown ready to exclaim over the rich find.

"What's the matter with the seventh strike?" cried the detective. "Look at those nuggets, will you, Edith? By the Jumping Jeremiah, they are beauties! Any more like them in there, Young Klondike? Ye gods and little fishes, but you are well named! There's no end to the riches that come rolling into your lap."

"Loads more! Dead loads!" replied Ned.

"Dick says that you've struck the rope and the bucket."

"That's what we have. Let me go and get the other pan and then we'll talk."

"We've got to talk about this snow business pretty quick.

It's bad job enough being caught in this trap without having a snow storm to come plumping down on top of us."

But somehow Ned couldn't get up much worry over this snow, which seemed to worry everybody else, and he crawled through the passage again, presently returning with the other pan of nuggets.

"I must go and have a look at that hole," said the Unknown. "I guess I'll go right now."

"Wait a moment," replied Ned, kneeling down beside the pan; "let's try to get some idea of what we've struck."

"Oh, it's gold; gold is as plenty about here as huckleberries in a Maine pasture. I—ye gods and little fishes! Look there!"

The Unknown pointed toward the mouth of the little cave leading into the other sink.

To the astonishment of all they saw a great head of hair coming toward them.

It was one of the wild men!

He crawled out of the passage and, springing up, threw his hands high above his head and just stood there bare-headed and barefooted, his rags fluttering around him and the snow settling upon his hair and unkempt beard.

"Mercy, marster! Mercy!" he cried. "Do not kill me! I am almost dead now!"

CHAPTER X.

THE GOLD HUNTERS OF HIGH ROCK.

Young Klondike dropped the rifle which he had raised to his shoulder.

It was startling, the sudden appearance of this strange apparition, and then out came the other one to increase their surprise.

The two "wild men" looked enough alike to be twin brothers.

The only difference that Ned could see between them was that the second man was a little shorter than the first.

"Who are you?" demanded Young Klondike. "Don't be afraid. We are your friends."

"And you will not kill us?"

"Kill you? No, certainly not. What do you take us for. We don't want to do you any harm; but from the way you have treated us I am not so sure that you can say the same."

"Pardon, marster," said the first wild man, speaking a very broad English dialect; "us is only two poor Cornishmen. We were here before you bought this land, and we think we ought to have what we found. Us doan't want no more and are to give up now."

It was easy to see that the poor fellow was as simple as a child."

"Let me take 'em in hand," said the Unknown. "Where are your arms, my men?"

"Us left 'em behind us. We want to surrender," was the reply. "Us did not want to kill anybody. 'Twould have been easy to do that, sir, but we surrender now. Us only wanted to drive you all away, but we find you are too many for us and we can't; so we give up right now, and for the love of heaven give us some old clothes if you've

got them, for us is nearly dead with the cold and the hunger."

Tears came into the man's eyes; both were shaking and shivering in a most pitiful way.

"Do you know who this gentleman is?" asked the Unknown.

"Yes, indeed. He's Young Klondike, the big mining boss from Dawson City, who owns this land."

"Right you are; and who are you?"

"Sure, I'm Robert Frazer, sir, and this is my brother James. We are from Cornwall, where we worked all our lives in the tin mines. We came in here last spring gold hunting and we've had such luck that we did not quit work and get out when the season ended and we ought to have quit, and now we can't get out, for we'd perish trying to make our way to Forty Mile or any other place. We were afraid of meeting your people and—and—well, boss, we've made a big mistake and we are likely to perish here if you don't show marcy to us and help us out with clothes and food."

Here was a strange story, truly.

It seemed hard to realize that any two men of ordinary common sense could be such fools. But the Unknown, who was familiar with all classes of people, was quite equal to the occasion.

"Frazer," he said abruptly, "you and your brother are trespassers on this land and will have to get out at once; but we will help you and see that no harm comes to you. Is that what you want?"

"And what about the gold we have dug already?" asked the man. "We want that. We are peaceable, quiet men, and want to make no trouble, but we are at your marcy, masters; don't be too hard upon us and we will help you to get out of this place, which, if I mistake not, you are not able to do now."

"That's a bargain," spoke up Ned. "I don't want to interfere with anything these poor fellows have done here, do you, Dick?"

"Certainly not," replied Dick. "Let them have whatever they've dug."

"It is much, marsters," said Frazer doubtfully; "still we think we ought to have it. When we began here it was said that no one owned this land."

"Yet you kept on digging after you found Young Klondike owned it," broke in the Unknown. "I don't know that I'd be in too big a hurry, Ned."

"What's done is done. I've said it," replied Ned shortly. "Frazer, you and your brother may keep the gold. Learn us the way out and you shall go with us to the mill, if you are able to get there, as you are."

"We can't get there as we are, marster," replied the man. "We would freeze to death. Here in the caves we manage to keep warm, for we've got bear skins and blankets, but we could not walk across the lake."

"Very well, then, you stay here until we can send you clothes," said Ned. "We will see that you are taken care of, and I guarantee that your gold shall be safe."

"That's all we asks, sir," said Frazer, "and we are very thankful to you. Now for yourselves, it is trouble with

those men outside; they have fastened you in here; they mean that you shall starve to death and give them a chance to seize your mill on the island. Is that right?"

"It certainly is," replied Ned. "Can you help us?"

"We can."

"Then do it."

"Will you be good enough to follow us, marster. You shall hear their plottings and their plannings for yourself."

"Upon my word, this is great," whispered the detective. "I only hope, Young Klondike, that they don't mean to lead us into a trap."

"I'll take my chances on that," said Ned. "I'm going to trust them. I believe if we use them right they'll do the same by us."

And here was where Ned showed his wisdom.

The two Frazers were just what they appeared to be, a pair of simple-minded Cornish miners, who, understanding their business thoroughly, had wandered into this wild region to hunt for gold.

Their greed had got them into trouble, for they had not properly posted themselves about the climate, and now that it was too late, they had learned their mistake.

Young Klondike and his party followed them into the small sink, where they paused before the prospect hole.

"There's nothing like it in the world, sir," said Robert Frazer. "When we first came here I struck this place. The hole in the rock back there where you came in was open then; it was us as fitted in that stone, and we've done all the work here with our own hands."

"Did you make that blast the other night?" demanded the Unknown.

"We did. That was done so we could have a clearer hoist. We were months working on those holes."

"Yes, and you would have killed us by letting the rock fall on our heads."

"No, no, sir. We thought you'd gone. The echoes of the cave deceived us, so they did."

"Did the echoes of the cave deceive us when we heard a troop of men walking among the rocks above us?"

"Most like they did, sir, if you heard aught like that, for there's no one here but me and brother Jim, and that's the truth."

"You don't need to say any more. Let bygones be bygones," said Ned. "These good fellows know now which side their bread is buttered, and I'm sure they are going to help us all they can."

"They want to help us to raise that stone so we can get out of here," said the Unknown.

"No one can raise that stone from the inside," said Frazer; "but it don't matter. We can take you right out without that."

"Lead on," said Ned. "Don't let us waste any more time talking about it."

"Why, it has stopped snowing," said Edith as they started after Frazer across the sink.

It was a fact. The storm proved to be no storm, but only a squall, and now the clouds had passed over High Rock and in a manner the sun was shining again.

Once across the sink, the Frazers led the way in behind

some projecting rocks and there were a series of natural steps leading up upon the ledges which towered above them.

"Do we go up here?" asked Ned.

"Yes, to our house," replied Frazer. "It is not much of a place, boss, only a cave like all the rest, but you shall see it, and then you shall know what sort of men you have been trusting; then you will find that we hain't the worst—no, we are not."

It was a long pull up the rocks; some places were so rough that it was all they could do to make the climb.

At length they came out upon a broad shelf overlooking the main cave. Here was the edge of the shaft also, for the opening into the small sink was nothing more.

Frazer now explained that there was no way of reaching the top of High Rock that they knew of and he led the boys to the edge of the shelf and pointed down.

It was fearful to look into the cave from this dizzy height.

Lights were flashing about and they could see the miners, looking as small as ants, working in the prospect hole.

"Do you want to see their faces, marster?" asked Frazer.

"Do you want to know who they are?"

"We want to see how you flashed that light," said the Unknown, "and I suppose that is what you mean."

"That's it, marster; it is very simple. See here."

He took Ned's lantern, which had been brought along, lighted it and placed it on a ledge as high up as he could reach.

Immediately a dazzling white light was thrown down into the cave below.

"More mica on the rocks overhead there," cried the Unknown, pointing up. "There's your reflector, boys."

It was mica that did it. Right above them the rocks shelved over, although there was an opening on top.

The mystery of the light was now explained.

As Ned gazed down he could see the miners looking up, and he involuntarily drew back.

"You need not be afraid, marster; they cannot hear you," said James Frazer, speaking almost for the first time; "but you can hear every word they say. Put your ears here against the wall."

"What's this, what's this? Is a whispering gallery to be added to the other wonders of High Rock?" cried the Unknown.

Ned clapped his ear to the wall at the spot indicated by James Frazer.

To his astonishment he could hear voices talking as if from a great distance.

Each voice was clear and distinct. He was able to recognize Bill Bradley's and Oliver Owens'.

"It's that infernal light again," Owens was saying. "If it ain't the devil's work I don't know what you call it; but it ain't going to scare me away from here."

"Nor any of us," growled Bill Bradley's hoarse bass. "We haven't done away with Young Klondike & Co. to be scared off of such digging as this."

Ned turned pale. "Dick," he whispered, "it's wonderful! I can hear every word, and say, you wouldn't believe it. Bill Bradley's in the plot, too."

"Bill? It can't be!" cried Dick. "Bill is the most honest fellow going."

But it was. What Young Klondike had heard he had heard, and when Dick Luckey came to clap his ear against the rocks he heard something more startling still, which must be reserved for the next chapter to explain.

CHAPTER XI.

BACK TO ISLAND.

"What on earth ails you, Dick?" cried Edith. "You look as white as though you had seen a ghost."

"Hush!" breathed Dick. "I want to listen. Great heavens, Ned, who would have supposed that Bill Bradley could be such a scoundrel?"

"Ah, marster, what did I tell you?" said Robert Frazer. "Us has been a-listening, brother and me, and when I heered 'em and understood what it all meant, we went down to look for you, detarmined to try no more to scare you away, for right is right and——"

"There! That's all! They've stopped talking now!" broke in Dick, pulling away from the wall. "Ned, what do you suppose?"

"You'd better tell it, Dick. I heard enough to show me what Bradley was!" cried Ned. "A hypocrite, a scoundrel. But what now, Dick?"

"They mean to start for the island in an hour's time, and their intention is to clean out the place and take possession of it."

"What! What!" cried the Unknown. "Is Nat Ring in the plot, too?"

"No, not Ring; they intend to kill him; but most of the men on the island are, and the few who are not will be killed, too."

"Dastardly!" cried Edith.

"It's abominable," said Ned. "We must get over there at once."

"That's it," said the detective. "The sooner we make a move the better; but how can we get over to the island without those scoundrels seeing us?"

"It's easy," said Robert Frazer. "I will show you a way out of the main sink which will shorten your road to the island a mile."

"That's business," cried Ned. "Don't forget it, Mr. Frazer, that we'll soon make you comfortable, and as for reward——"

"Don't talk to me about reward. I don't want any," broke in the gold hunter. "Give us clothes, give us food; that's all we want. What do I want of money? Look here."

Close to where they stood the rope came up out of the sink, passing through a pulley overhead, and just beyond that where the rocks jutted out was a spacious cave to which the Frazers now led the party; Ned had no sooner passed inside the entrance than he saw what the man meant.

A great pile of golden nuggets lay against the wall.

It was a fortune in itself; but it did not help these freezing, starving prospectors a bit.

There were two rifles hanging against the wall and there

were pots and pans and mining tools, a couple of bear skins for beds and a very small supply of food, which Robert Frazer showed them, declaring it to be all they had.

"We'll soon fix that," said Ned. "Show us the way back to the island and you needn't worry. All that gold is yours, and all that you can get out from below until we return goes with it. After that I shall expect you to turn the mines over to us."

"We'll do that cheerfully, marster. Will you start now?"

"Right now."

Then Frazer showed them a way down to the shelf where they kept guard the night they watched the bucket, and after that it was easy work getting down to the level of the big sink.

"Stay here, boys," said the Unknown. "Before we make another move I want to do a little detective work. I want to find out, if I can, just when Bradley and his gang intend to start."

"Don't leave us," said Dick. "For goodness sake let's all keep together. If you should be seen we'll have to fight it out right here."

"Don't you fret. I know my business. All I want is to get a squint at them," replied the detective, and off he went.

He was back in less than ten minutes with the startling news that the miners were packing up and getting ready to move.

This started up the whole party, of course, and the Frazers led them to a canyon on the opposite side of High Rock from the entrance to the cave.

"There you are, marster," said Robert. "If you follow this canyon you will come out on the shore of Black Lake a mile nearer the island than by going the other way, and that ought to give you a good start."

They took leave of the gold hunters here, as it seemed cruel to ask them to go any further, unprotected as they were from the cold.

Hurrying through the canyon, they came unexpectedly out upon the shore of Black Lake just as they were beginning to wonder if they had been deceived or were going wrong altogether.

"Leave off there!" cried the detective. "There you are, Young Klondike; the men are just starting now."

They could see them moving away from the shore trail off upon the ice, single file.

"Confounded traitors!" cried the Unknown, shaking his fist at them. "Oh, don't I wish I had the power to clap the handcuffs on every mother's son of you! Wouldn't I enjoy that!"

"We may get there yet," said Edith; "but we've got other work to do first, and that's to win over the men remaining at the mill to our side."

"I'm afraid it's going to be a hard thing to do," said Dick. "From what I heard Bradley say, they are all fixed as it is. The plot was to dispose of us and seize the mill last night, but our move up to High Rock broke that all up."

"Lucky for us," said Edith.

"Decidedly. If we hadn't made the move we'd have

never struck the gold hunters of High Rock, and Young Klondike never would have made his seven strikes," added the detective; "but that don't make any plan for us, and we've got to make one if we expect to escape, for we can't run away unless we are anxious to freeze to death."

"Leave that to me," said Ned quietly. "All I ask is to get to the mill first. I'll do the rest."

There was no trouble in doing this, for it was only about a mile across to the island from where they were.

Of course it was certain that the miners could see them, but Ned knew very well that they had no glass and would not be able to make out who they were.

Then, on the other hand, there was the question of being seen from the island. This was something Ned particularly wanted to avoid, and in order to do it he made a slight detour and approached it on the side opposite the mill, now hidden by the hill which rose in the middle of the island.

There was no lookout, no one to observe them, all hands being no doubt busy in the shaft.

Now the mill on Golden Island, as it was called, was actually nothing more than a big frame structure built over the main shaft sunk to reach the gold deposit.

Here the miners lived and worked. The gold was brought up out of the shaft and dumped in one of the runs, where it was washed and the gravel thrown out, the dust and nuggets then being transferred into another and smaller room, where all was weighed and packed in small boxes, ready for shipment to Dawson City.

Beyond this room was the tool room, and on the other side the big living room of the miners, all being thus concentrated under one roof.

Now Young Klondike fully appreciated the danger of the rough life he led, surrounded by men all eager for gold. To provide against it he had caused a trap door to be built in the floor of the tool room, which connected with a ladder leading down into a cave, which in turn opened out upon the shore.

He led the way to the entrance to the cave now, and having dodged in under the overhanging rocks, they all here halted.

"Come," said Dick, "I'm going it blind. What are you going to do, Ned?"

"Exactly," said the Unknown. "That's what we want to know. What are you going to do?"

Ned laughed softly.

"I'll fix 'em," he said. "Just you follow me," and he led the way into the cave.

CHAPTER XII.

NED OPENS THE BLACK BOX.

Passing through the cave to the ladder, Ned went up and opened the trap door, and all hands found themselves in the tool room.

The door leading into the packing room was instantly thrown open and a miner named Joe Covert looked in.

"Hello, boss, that you?" he exclaimed, greatly surprised. "I didn't see you coming over the lake, and I was looking out the window, too."

"Joe," said Ned quietly, "tell Mr. Ring I'd like to see him."

"Sartain. Where's Bill Bradley and the boys?"

"They're coming."

"Now?" asked the man uneasily.

"Yes; they are right behind us. What's the matter, Joe?"

"Ask Ring. I'm mum," said the man, touching his finger to his lips, and he went out softly, closing the door.

In a moment Nat Ring, the foreman, came hurrying in.

"Great heavens, Mr. Golden, I'm glad to see you back again!" he exclaimed. "I've got terrible news to tell you! I——"

"Hold up, Ring."

"No, no! Let me speak! This is of the highest importance. I——"

"You want to tell me that there's a plot on foot for the men to rise up and murder us and seize the mine."

"That's it. How did you find it out?"

"Leave Young Klondike alone for finding out what's for his interest to know," muttered the Unknown. "By the Jumping Jeremiah! if the world has to come to an end next week I believe he'd get notice the day before."

"I know," said Ned. "Ring, how many men have we here now?"

"Forty-two, boss."

"Where are they?"

"Mostly in the shaft and working on the fires outside getting ready to sink them new prospect holes."

"How many can we depend upon to stand by us in case of a fight?"

"I don't believe there's more than ten."

"Joe being one of them?"

"Every time. He was the one who gave me warning. To tell you the honest truth, Mr. Golden, I never expected to see any of you back again, and——"

"I shall have to cut you short, Ring. How many rifles are there?"

"One for every man. Your crowd took them, I suppose?"

"Yes. Ring, you are a notary public and a commissioner of deeds, aren't you?"

"Why, yes."

"What in thunder are you driving at, Young Klondike?" cried the detective. "I've left all this to you so far, but if you are going to switch off onto such tommyrot questions I shall have to take a hand in."

"Hold your horses, Zed. When we know who you are we'll let you be boss. Ring, ring the bell and call up all hands!"

"Ring, ring the bell! Ye gods and little fishes! If I didn't know you so well I should be inclined to say you'd taken leave of your senses!" cried the Unknown. But Ned would give him no satisfaction, and Ring did ring the bell, and in the men came trooping, some out of the shaft, some from the big prospecting fires which were burning on the level land below the hill.

Ned, Dick and Edith all ranged themselves in a row, with

the Unknown standing a little in front of them, facing the men as they came in.

Mr. Ring, looking rather white and scared, took up his stand alongside of Ned.

Before Ned, resting on a table, was a small, black japanned cash-box.

"Boys," began Young Klondike, "I have called you up here to have a little talk. You know I've been rather lucky here in the diggings; perhaps it's because my partner is lucky; perhaps it's due to the presence of a lady which we all know always brings luck to a camp."

He paused. The men eyed him curiously. There were some sullen faces among them, too.

"Now, boys," continued Ned, "I went out to make a strike, and I've made seven. Are you glad? You ought to be, for I've treated you fair and square. Some of you look glad, and some of you don't, but I'm going to make you all glad—I'm going to open this black box!"

Now he had thoroughly aroused their curiosity. Not a man among them who did not feel anxious to know what the black box contained.

Ned drew a key from his pocket and opened it, taking out six blank deeds. These he arranged like a hand of cards and held them up, saying:

"Blank deeds, boys! Six! I can't work more than half a dozen mines, and I'm working that many now. Of these seven strikes I only want one. The others I'm going to make over to you, and they are rich ones, and don't you forget it, or if they don't prove so, we'll go out and strike six more."

"Hooray for Young Klondike!" shouted Joe Covert.

Several joined with him, others seemed to hang back.

"On condition," continued Ned, "that you organize yourselves right here into six companies of seven men each, and stand by the firm of Golden & Luckey through thick and thin."

The strong emphasis which Ned gave these last words must have shown the conspirators that all was known.

"Mr. Ring will draw up the deeds right now," he added. "You can work for me this week on and next week off, the alternate week to be devoted to your own claims. Who's with me? Who's against me? Speak out!"

It was Ned's magnetic manner as much as his liberality which carried the day.

"We're all with you, boss!" cried Bill Bangs, one of the toughest of the crowd. "You're white, you are! You are willing to give a poor man a share and I'll be danged if I go into any conspiracy against you. Three cheers for Young Klondike, boys! Hip! Hip! Hooray!"

The cheers were given with a will.

"Now, then!" cried Ned. "A favor to ask of you. There's a crowd coming here——"

"They are right here now," said the Unknown, who had moved over to the window.

"Who ain't in this?" added Ned. "We don't want them, and why? They tried to murder me—to murder my friends!"

And in a few impassioned words Ned told what had happened and appealed for help.

Did he get it? Well, rather! The average Klondiker is on the look out for himself.

No member of the six companies was anxious to increase the membership.

"We'll stand by the boss!" cried Bill Bangs, and it was he who went out to meet the Bradley and Oliver crowd.

"What do you fellows want here?" he called as they approached the island.

"The boss is dead; there's a big accident happened!" answered Bradley. "We've come back."

"Who's dead? By the Jumping Jeremiah, who's dead?" shouted the Unknown, running out, followed by Young Klondike, Dick, Edith and every man of the mill.

"You're not wanted here!" called Ned. "Leave this island, every one of you!"

Up went the rifles—forty-seven of them, including Nat Ring's.

And they left—left in a hurry, too, for Ned led his men down on the ice after them.

The last seen of the Bradley-Oliver gang they were off on the dead run toward Forty Mile.

Probably they reached there in due time, for some were afterward seen in Dawson City; but at all events Young Klondike was never troubled by them again.

In a few weeks six successful mines were being operated at High Rock and Ned was just getting ready to begin on the seventh, which he ultimately put in charge of the Frazer brothers, who proved to be very decent fellows, once they were washed, dressed and properly fed.

The seven strikes turned out good ones, and the seventh was the best of all, greatly adding to the wealth of the firm of Golden & Luckey.

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High Rock,**

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